

CONVERSION AND THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

I. Talking About Conversion

Conversion is problematic. It can be the singular most intense and vital transformation of a person's life. Conversion can change history. Yet to understand conversion is maddeningly difficult. To make a single generalization about conversion; to clarify what it is, when it occurs, or how to foster it, is to invite contradiction and qualification.

For example, conversion is preeminently a religious phenomenon. Yet there are exceptions. Arthur Darby Nock, writing in the 1930's, has reminded us that First Century philosophical schools enlisted converts.¹ In this century, Marxism--a political philosophy--has claimed a few converts.

So conversion is usually religious. However, religion usually isn't conversionist. The fertility or naturalistic religions of prehistory--the primal vision which sustained humankind through most of its existence--didn't summon conversions. The Neolithic builders of Stone Henge or the Bronze Age erectors of the Sumerian Ziggurats had no religious options which would make conversion a possibility. Archaic myths and rituals were embedded in the

¹Arthur Darby Nock, Conversion: The Old and New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933)

primitive concept of reality. Early peoples had no choice whether or not to embrace their culture's understanding of the sacred.

Only later, with the rise of prophetic religion, do conversions also emerge.² Traditions such as Judaism or Christianity which critique prevailing values and powers confront believers with a choice whether to cling to the old or embrace the new. Christian history at certain times has enjoyed seasons of renewal by fostering conversions in masses of people. The Great Awakening in America bristles with vivid accounts of personal conversions. Some of Christianity's greatest leaders--among them Paul, Augustine, Bunyan, and Wesley--are converts.

Christianity has also undergone centuries where conversions are rare. During the long stretch between Augustine and the Protestant Reformation, few conversions were documented.³ Christian churches today reflect this checkered history of conversion. Revivalistic traditions such as Baptists or Pentecostals, insist that a sudden, emotional conversion experience is the normative starting point of the Christian life. Old Line Protestants, on the other hand, may ignore conversion altogether or define it broadly enough so to make it meaningless.

²Ibid.

³Hugh T. Kerr and John Mulder, Conversions: The Christian Experience (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983). p. XII.

Even Christians who claim conversion experiences and who use the term readily, often cannot agree precisely what the concept entails. "Conversion" may mean no more than changing churches, as when a Methodist family--dissatisfied with its minister--begins worshipping with a Lutheran congregation. Someone else might use "conversion" to describe an absorbing emotional experience which persuades her to begin relief work among the poor.

"Conversion's" significance, diversity, and complexity has been amplified in recent decades by the rise of new religious movements and a resurgence of evangelical Christianity. Sociologist, Robert Wuthnow, reports that while American Christianity has drifted to the left in this century, the religious right has enjoyed an upsurge of its own.⁴ One consequence of this newfound conservative vitality is the popularization of conversion talk. To be "born again" today is respectable. Discussion of conversions and religious experience in general is no longer confined to marginal sect groups. Today not only is religious television programming teeming with talk of personal conversion, so is mainline programming. Born again celebrities who speak of their faith are commonplace in American popular culture.

⁴Robert Wuthnow, The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988). p. 173.

Another consequence of the restructuring of American religion is a deep polarity along liberal-conservative lines. Conversion, with all of its ambiguity and new found popularity is certainly caught in this cross fire. This, in turn, has drawn scholarly attention, yielding a spate of new books and articles on the subject. Surprisingly, some of the most vital studies of conversion today are in the social sciences where there is an interest in commitment, recruitment, and personal transformation.⁵ Thus, in our current religious climate of diversity and controversy and in our intellectual climate of intense study, the complexity and significance of conversion are certainly in full flower.

The natural Protestant response to theological problems such as those which surround conversion is to appeal to the Bible. As the Westminster Confession says, "...All things necessary for...salvation, faith, and life is either expressly set down in Scripture or by good and consequence may be deduced in Scripture..."⁶ Surely, conversion is one of these "things." Curiously, however, neither the Old nor New Testament yields definitive answers to the questions about conversion that have arisen through the Church's

⁵Lewis R. Rambo, "Current Research on Religious Conversion:" Religious Studies Review Vol. 8, No. 2, April 1982.

⁶"The Westminster Confession of Faith" 6.006 The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA): Book of Confessions.

experience.

For example, the word, "conversion," together with related words like "convert" or "converts," appear with surprising infrequency in English translations of the New Testament. The KJV, on ten occasions, renders strepho or epistrepho as "I convert." The RSV, successor to the KJV, opts for the simpler "I turn" in all of these, save Acts 15.3. A newer translation, the NIV, uses "convert" or "conversion" eight times. None of these, however, are for epistrepho⁷, but for neophutos, prosalutos, and aparcha.

None of this is to suggest that "conversion" is a non-biblical concept. Such a conclusion would be simplistic. Beverly Gaventa observes that metanoia and epistrepho were "stereotypical conversion language" in the New Testament world.⁸ The point of my observations is that the New Testament writers use neither these words, nor any others, consistently or systematically to describe the religious transformation which begins the Christian life. Neither do translators agree which Greek words correspond with the English word "conversion." So if, in any part of the New Testament, conversion is being discussed, the text usually does not announce this fact by

⁷Except Acts 15.3

⁸Beverly Roberts Gaventa, From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). p. 87.

employing obvious key words.

This is strikingly true of the instances in the New Testament traditionally held to be personal conversion accounts. It would seem too fundamental even to require proof that the Ethiopian Eunuch, Cornelius, and Paul of Tarsus are converts. Preachers have traditionally called Paul's "conversion" the prototype of all Christian conversions.⁹ Nevertheless, the New Testament text doesn't use the standard terminology in connection with these. If these are conversions then they have been deemed so by subsequent church tradition rather than by the New Testament itself.

Thus, how the church draws its definition of "conversion" tends to determine what in the New Testament counts as conversion. If our operating definition of conversion is fluid and imprecise, then any New Testament story about religious change or entrance into a Christian environment appears to be a conversion. If, on the other hand, we emphasize that conversion is radical discontinuity with a sinful past, then suddenly the Ethiopian Eunuch and Cornelius--both pious and searching men--don't fit the pattern. How we define the concept determines how we read the New Testament for information on conversion. How precisely and clearly we frame it; how self-conscious we are of our operating definition, tends to dictate what we find in the scriptures.

⁹Rambo p. 145-159

This is how Krister Stendahl raised the question whether we should regard Paul's experience as a conversion. Assuming that conversion entails a change of religions as resolution for a troubled conscience,¹⁰ Stendahl asserts that "call" would better describe Paul's transformation. Paul's change, according to Stendahl, much more resembled the commissioning of an Old Testament prophet. Other New Testament scholars, operating with different definitions, have argued that conversion is indeed a useful term in understanding Paul's experience. Again, one's operating notion of what conversion entails is all-important when studying conversion in the New Testament.

Alan Segal, in Paul the Convert,¹¹ calls conversion etic vocabulary.¹² By this he means it belongs to the discourse of those who analyze and describe systems or cultures from the outside. Emic terminology, in contrast, is language embedded in its own system or culture. New Testament authors speak of "repentance," being "born anew," "turning to God," and so on to describe the change people

¹⁰Krister Stendahl, Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

¹¹Segal, Alan F., Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹²Ibid. p. 20ff.

undergo when they meet Christ. This is emic language. Talk of conversion is emic in the church as it speaks of its own experiences of transformation. "Conversion" is etic when moderns use it to analyze New Testament events such as Paul's Damascus Road experience or the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch.

Segal makes the emic-etic distinction to help the reader to achieve self-consciousness in the use of terminology. "Conversion" is a powerful word among Christians. We should not, however, uncritically impose it on the New Testament text in a way that obscures the subtleties and nuances of what the ancient authors actually said. We need to be aware which words are New Testament words and which words are our words about New Testament words.

a. The Plan of this Paper

The minimal explicit use of conversion language in the New Testament does not mean that scripture does not attest to those experiences entailed in conversion. Neither does it mean that we cannot consult the New Testament for fresh insight on conversion. It does mean, however, that any such study must take pains to articulate exactly how the conversion concept shall be defined before consulting biblical texts for confirmation and new insights about that definition. The point of carefully drawing a contemporary definition is to keep a distinction between what belongs to our culture and what belongs to the New Testament.

A helpful analogy comes from the psychological concept of projection. Projection is finding in others traits which are undesirable and unacknowledged in oneself. Paradoxically, self-awareness of one's own undesirable tendencies helps us to achieve greater objectivity in assessing others.

This paper seeks to explore a portion of the New Testament for insight on conversion with this kind of objectivity. We will begin by clarifying precisely what "conversion" shall mean for this discussion. In doing this, we will not be reading the text through the lens of an unacknowledged definition. Once we have compared and contrasted our designated definition with what the biblical text declares, we will be in a position to allow the scripture to modify and enrich our understanding of conversion.

For definition, we will use Gabriel Fackre's fourfold typology which he laid out in 1974 in the *Andover Newton Quarterly*.¹³ While any number of definitions exist, Fackre's is contemporary, conventional, and represents centrist Protestant thinking.

Further, we will confine the biblical scope of this study to the Gospel According to Mark. Other theological perspectives are available in the New Testament. We choose Mark because he (or she)¹⁴

¹³Gabriel Fackre, "Conversion," *The Andover Newton Quarterly*, Volume 14. p. 171-89.

¹⁴To avoid awkward prose and in keeping with Church tradition, we

apparently originated¹⁵ the genre of a "gospel"--an extended narrative which structures both the Good News and the nature of the Christian life around the pattern of Jesus' career. Further, use of one of the Gospel accounts holds promise for determining what Jesus himself may have said about conversion.

It bears mentioning that Mark is a complex and ancient document. The identity of the readers for which the unknown author originally wrote has been the subject of intense debate and speculation. Reading commentaries or secondary literature quickly reveals how little consensus exists on many points of interpretation. Even surveying the field of Markan scholarship to sort out the interpretations is a daunting task.

I write this paper against this background of ongoing development of insight into Mark's Gospel. I am particularly indebted to the work of Howard Clark Kee¹⁶, Mary Ann Tolbert¹⁷, and

will designate the title of the Second Gospel and its author as "Mark" acknowledging that neither the name nor gender of the author are known.

¹⁵Norman Perrin: The New Testament, An Introduction: Proclamation and Parenthesis, Myth and History, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974). p. 143.

¹⁶Howard Clark Kee, Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977).

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Ernest Best¹⁸ for their insights which are wonderfully incompatible, but insights nevertheless. Their work provides much of the general interpretive background for Mark which is beyond the scope of this study to establish.

II. Gabriel Fackre on Conversion

a. General

In 1973 Gabriel Fackre delivered the Hyde Lecture at the Autumn convocation of Andover Newton Theological School. Titled, "Conversion," and later printed in the Andover Newton Quarterly, Fackre begins by asserting that evangelism and the conversions which result are emerging emphases in the Church. Because these have been "muted"¹⁹ in the past or eclipsed by other theological emphasizes, Fackre undertakes to expound the nature of conversion by pulling together--in ad hoc manner--insights from the Bible, church, history, and personal experience:

¹⁷Mary Ann Tolbert: Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1989.)

¹⁸Ernest Best: Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark. (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, 4, 1981).

¹⁹Fackre, p. 171.

A responsible hermeneutic will then bring scripture into conversation with tradition and contemporary experience (Storybook, Storytellers, and Storyland) in search for today's rendering of the meaning of conversion (our Story).²⁰

The resulting description of conversion is not so much a hard edge definition as it is an impressionistic sketch. Fackre litters his prose with quotes, metaphors and picturesque expressions. These prevent his image of conversion from becoming rigid or legalistic. This style lets Fackre embrace paradox and variety in his image of conversion without seeming to slip into contradiction. For example, at the beginning of the essay, the author probes the image of "turning," concluding:

Christian conversion is, therefore, a threshold commitment, a new posture, a new attitude for the journey to follow, a new beginning.²¹

Later, he makes this more complex and somewhat paradoxical by asserting that the turning never ends. Conversion is re-enacted throughout the Christian life:

...Pilgrimage consists of the re-enactment in via of the commitments made at the inception of the journey. Each aspect of turning is relived as a step along the way...The quarter turn of repentance reemerges on pilgrimage as

²⁰Ibid. p. 172.

²¹Ibid. p. 173.

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daily penitence...The turn of belief is reborn as the struggle to repossess our faith and hope.²²

A more legalistic or systematic style would not permit this and other paradoxes to stand side-by-side so comfortably in the picture.

This is not to suggest that Fackre's rendering of conversion is vague or all-inclusive. Rather, he asserts that four distinct elements--repentance, belief, baptism, and service--must be present in genuine Christian conversion.

Authentic Christian re-orientation is a full turn that includes each. If one or another is omitted, there may be a turning of sorts. But instead of being "on the right track," it goes off at an angle, stumbling into the shadows, losing touch with the horizon that lies out ahead.²³

Fackre orients most of his discussion around these four "turning points" which have a logical sequence.

b. Repentance

Fackre's first phase of conversion is repentance, the "turning from something."²⁴ The New Testament word, metanoia attests to this element in the scriptures. That from which we turn Fackre labels

²²Ibid. p. 189.

²³Ibid. p. 175.

²⁴Ibid. p. 176.

in the broadest of terms--the "dominion of darkness."²⁵ Under this concept, Fackre includes: the power of Satan, idols, or whatever disrupts God's "shalom." The contemporary manifestation of "darkness" might include, "Drugs, racism, power, lust, sexism, sports, cars, television, and torpor."²⁶ The "darkness" also tyrannizes collectives of people. This gives birth to political tyrannies, economic baronies, military systems, technocratic juggernauts, structures of racial injustice, and dehumanizing educational designs.²⁷ Fackre's point in including both individual and corporate evils as participating in the same "darkness" is to prevent repentance from degenerating into moralism. For a convert to give up an inner vice, only to yield to the captivity of political oppression, is not a sufficient rejection of the "darkness."

Other general insights find their way into Fackre's discussion of repentance. For instance, the wherewithal to "shake loose" from evil comes with the knowledge that it has been de-throned by Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry. Further, Christians need not feel embarrassed about the unfashionable sound of the language of repentance. Concepts like evil, guilt, sin, morality, the Devil,

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid. p. 177.

and the like should have a place in our vocabulary simply because they manifest themselves in contemporary life.

c. Believe

If conversion begins with a repentant "turn from," it continues with an embracing "turning to."²⁸ Fackre uses the image of light to describe what the convert has assented to, trusted, and in which he or she finds hope.²⁹ Fackre's operative concept for this turning point is "faith." Faith, first of all, is the assent and trust in God's forgiveness.

To believe in God is to have faith that the source of our wrongs has been dealt with, our beguilement is forgiven, our ruptures are healed, and a way back around is possible, not by our merit, but by God's grace.³⁰

Faith also entails the element of hope. Hope is faith's future orientation which holds that the powers of darkness will not ultimately triumph. The kingly rule of Christ has and will bring to completion his sovereignty over the cosmos.

Jesus Christ, according to the teaching of the whole of the New Testament, has already borne away sin and destroyed death. So also has he already (according to Colossians 2.15)

²⁸Ibid. p. 179.

²⁹Ibid. p. 180.

³⁰Ibid.

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completely disarmed those 'principalities and powers' and made a spectacle of them in his own triumph in order finally to tread them down under his feet on the day of his coming again (I Corinthians 15.15).³¹

Faith at this turning point perceives and receives a personal and cosmic reality that has been changed through Christ's ministry.

At this point in Fackre's essay he pauses to caution the reader that repentance and belief alone are insufficient to constitute the full turning of conversion. Both of these entail a turn to God. Conversion, however, entails also our turn to people.

The failure to understand that the threshold commitment must include turning to other human beings as well as the divine Other, the love of neighbor as well as the love of God, is the constant peril of pietist evangelism.³²

Thus the final two turning points, baptism and service, are oriented around other people.

d. Baptism

While calling baptism at one point "the sacrament of justification by faith,"³³ Fackre usually uses the term to mean joining the church.

³¹Ibid. p. 180-1.

³²Ibid. p. 181.

³³Ibid. p. 182.

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Baptism is one phase of conversion that marks the process as more than a change of heart and head. It is a change of location. It means new relationships and a new community. Conversion, as the threshold commitment to Christian faith, includes passage through the doorway of a new household. Baptism is that portal of entry. It is turning toward and into, that people who repent and believe.³⁴

In this section, Fackre returns to his image of light, suggesting that converts not only see the light, but also see by it. What they see are other people. The other people are--as is the convert--engaged in the Christian pilgrimage. Baptism, thus, is the embrace of the "communal character of the Christian tale..."³⁵

e. Serve

The light illuminates not only the community of faith but also the entire human community. The ability to see and serve all of humanity is the final turning point and test of genuine conversion. Fackre insists that service is intrinsic to conversion, not subsequent to it. "To position [service] only subsequent to conversion is a perennial and fatal temptation."³⁶ Fackre's examples of service are: loving the unlovely and lovable, clothing

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid. p. 184.

the naked, feeding the prisoner, doing justice, making peace, offering a cup of cold water, and noticing the victims of the bandits along the Jericho Road.

f. Other Observations on Conversion

Fackre's discussion concludes with several final observations about conversion.

First, he wrestles with the paradox of human effort versus divine work, refusing to attribute the turning of conversion to either. "God does all, and we do all...In retrospect, we acknowledge that our repentance, faith, baptism, and service are made possible by the power of God working in, with, and under our powers."³⁷ Unfortunately, Fackre asserts, the language of divine intervention has been monopolized by one wing of Christianity and needs to be readopted by the entire faith community.³⁸ In other words, those on the religious "left" need to feel comfortable attributing to God a crucial role in the Christian experience.

Second, Fackre touches on the expression "New Birth." Here he emphasizes that conversion is something which happens to us rather than something we do for ourselves. Curiously, Fackre fails to seize upon the fact that gennethe anothen can be rendered "born from above"

³⁷Ibid. p. 185.

³⁸Ibid.

in addition to "born again." Instead, he plays with the image of physical birthing to point out that conversion brings a radical life transition which leaves the convert a new infant in faith.³⁹ This, in turn, leaves open the question whether the newborn will grow and mature into the fullness of Christian life. By recalling that birth yields only a baby, Fackre deflates any implicit self-congratulation in those who boast of born again experiences.

Third, Fackre acknowledges that the Holy Spirit is conferred upon the converted.

Fourth, he moves to a consideration of the language of salvation popularly linked with conversion. Salvation is the unfolding work of God in the world. Jesus' resurrection establishes in principle God's triumph which will be experienced universally in God's future consummation of all things. Salvation, rooted both in the historical and the eschatological, is abused by the expression, "are you saved?"⁴⁰ Salvation is not accomplished in conversion. Rather, God's salvation is manifested in a human life in the turning of repentance, belief, baptism, and service.⁴¹ Conversion is both a response to God's salvific work in history and an appropriate anticipation of God's salvific future.

³⁹Ibid. p. 186.

⁴⁰Ibid. p. 187.

⁴¹Ibid. p. 188.

Fifth and finally, as mentioned above, Fackre asserts that the full turn of conversion echoes throughout the Christian life. Repentance, belief, baptism, and service never cease to be part of the pilgrimage. First there is the turn which establishes the new posture, then there is the walk in the new posture. Turning is very different from arriving. It is the walk of the Christian life which ultimately brings the pilgrim to the goal. And in the walk the turning points of the initiation continue to be remembered and reenacted.⁴²

To summarize, Gabriel Fackre's consideration of conversion is a mildly polemical effort intended to prevent the concept from being defined and used exclusively by the pietistic movement of the time. He does this, first, by insisting that a full turn be made. The threshold commitment must not end with repentance and belief. Entrance into the church and service to humanity complete the turn and prevent the convert from embarking on a tangent. Second, Fackre relativizes the importance of conversion lest the initial reorientation come to be equated with the whole of the Christian life. Converts are babes in faith. The pilgrimage awaits. Reorientation makes little sense unless it is followed by a journey. Finally, and more subtly, Fackre recalls God's role in a new believer's turning. Lest the second birth be worn as a badge of pride, the author reminds

⁴²Ibid. p. 189.

us that God's role in a new believer's four point turning. Repentance, faith, community membership, and service are always God's work together with our effort.

III. The Gospel According to Mark

We turn now to the Gospel According to Mark. The Second Gospel, like Fackre's essay, is a situational document written at least in part to clarify the nature of the Christian life. Our goal, for the balance of this discussion, will be to determine if there are points of contact between the two depictions of the Christian experience, especially the entrance into that experience. Hopefully, the comparison between the two documents will permit the Gospel to enrich and reform our attitude towards that personal turning that has come in our time to be so important.

a. The Centrality of Discipleship in Mark

The very development in the Early Church of a unique genre of literature called a Gospel has immense significance for this essay. It is in the gospel format that various traditions and stories about Jesus are compiled, arranged, and linked into a continuous narrative of Jesus' career. Previous, more episodic, oral tales of miracles, sayings, revelations, and the longer passion narrative all circulated in the primitive church prior to the development of the gospel. Each of these forms, free-standing, would give rise to a

particular view of Jesus and the importance of his ministry.⁴³

Mark's genius as the first compiler of a literary form which incorporates a variety of Jesus traditions plus a passion narrative, is that he not only tells a more complex tale, but is able to call forth a more complex form of discipleship. For example, Mark includes exorcisms and healings in the story. For Mark, the presence of Christ in the world signals a new epoch when the reign of demons and sickness is broken. Mark tempers this, however, by including the passion narrative. Healing isn't everything. Repeatedly in the story, Jesus attempts to silence those who, in the enthusiasm of their own healings, would go to their friends with dramatic reports about Jesus-the-miracle-worker.

The same can be said about Jesus-the-revealer. In numerous ways, Mark's Jesus reveals to his disciples that the time of his appearance is the time of eschatological fulfillment. Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom's presence (11.15), the execution of John the Baptist (6.27), the Transfiguration (9.2ff), the parable of the Tenants (12.1ff), the teachings in Chapter 13, and certainly the crucifixion and resurrection are just a few of the ways that Mark portrays Jesus as revealer of the eschatological situation. Taken alone, such teachings might give rise to an esoteric, apocalyptic

⁴³Charles H. Talbert: "The Gospel and the Gospels" Interpretation Vol. XXXIII, no. 4, October 1979. p. 356.

community. Taken in concert with the other material in Mark, these become part of a larger tapestry which evokes a more complex discipleship.

So the fact that the new genre evolved, coming to enjoy canonical status in the church, suggests that the previous oral and literary traditions were not adequate in preserving the memory of Jesus. Neither did they evoke and support the kind of response that the Gospel writers deemed appropriate. Assuming that Mark originated the gospel genre, we can also assume that he was deeply interested in the meaning of faithful response.

What is faithful or appropriate response for Mark? Even a cursory reading of this earliest gospel reveals many characters who respond faithfully or with striking perception. Some of these are seemingly unpromising characters such as the leper (1.40), the Syrophenician woman (7.25ff), or the Centurion (15.39). Many of these characters would have been familiar in the pre-Markan traditions. By assembling these traditions into an extended story or popular novel,⁴⁴ Mark is able to develop other character types--disciples, Jewish religious officials, and possibly John the Baptist. While recipients of healing emerge and disappear in the text, other characters, notably the disciples, move through most of the scenes from beginning to end. The fact that Mark has created

⁴⁴Tolbert, p. 70f.

the extended narrative which provides for such character development suggests that in Mark's reckoning, Jesus' disciples are of particular importance for his readers.

There is further evidence that demonstrates Mark's particular interest in Jesus' disciples. The text is explicit at several points declaring that the disciples are particularly gifted and enjoy special status. Jesus' disciples need not observe customary fasting (2.18ff) or Sabbath regulations (2.23ff). Rather, they are new vessels that receive the new "wine" of Jesus and his message. In the story, Jesus occasionally takes disciples aside for special instruction which amplifies Jesus' public teaching (4.10, 9.29, 10.11). Jesus tells the disciples that they have "been given the secret of the kingdom of God" (4.11). Peter, James, and John are witnesses to Jesus' mountaintop transfiguration (9.1ff). The very fact that the disciples are able to follow Jesus is evidence of God's special provision and his intent to reward them with eternal life (10.27ff). Despite the strong emphasis on betrayal in Mark's Last Supper, the text also makes clear the disciples' special status as Jesus' intimates. This is clear in Jesus' comments which accompany his sharing of bread and cup. Finally, and surprisingly, the empty tomb narrative announces that the risen Jesus will rejoin his disciples in Galilee (16.7). Despite their failure and fear Jesus does not forsake them. So even a casual survey of the Second Gospel turns up several explicit declarations that the disciples were unique

and important.

Part of the disciples' uniqueness is discernable in Jesus' expectation that they will engage in ministry modeled after his own. The text bristles with clues that the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the community parallel each other. All three undertake preaching followed by suffering at the hands of an evil generation. Thus, when the Twelve are dispatched on their own missionary journey (6.7), their ministry of preaching and exorcism is modeled after that of Jesus and John.

The most striking parallel between Jesus' work and that of the disciples emerges in the 8th chapter with these words to disciples and the assembled multitude: "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up a cross and follow me" (8.34). Even to the extent of cross-bearing and all that it entails, the disciples' mission is modeled after that of their master.

This is developed in the teaching section of the 13th Chapter. In the days before "the son of man's coming in clouds with great power and glory" (13.26), the disciples will encounter the full force of humanity's evil. Located just prior to Jesus' passion, phrases in the 13th Chapter clearly tie the predicted experience of disciples with the impending arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus.

...Deliver you up to councils...beaten...stand before
governors and kings for my sake...bring you to tri-
al...deliver you up. (13.9-11, selected phrases)

Even before Jesus states that cross-bearing is to be central

to the disciples' experience, Mark hints at it through the interpolation of the beheading of John narrative in the midst of the Twelve's missionary journey (6.7-30). Assuming that Mark inserts one narrative into another to hint at some relationship between the two, we can discern a connection between the Twelve's journey and John's execution. It's an ominous connection. John suffers for having done precisely what the Twelve are doing--preaching repentance.

The foregoing is only a sampling of evidence which points to Mark's focus on Jesus' disciples. We could also point to the crucial passage which stretches between 8.22 to 10.52 devoted extensively to the disciples. The Bartimaeus text which epitomizes faithful response and following, is positioned in a significant place in the narrative structure, hinting at Mark's concern for those who perceive and take the path with Jesus. There is, doubtless other evidence which supports the conclusion that the disciples--their development and difficulties--are important to Mark. They are important Mark because the discipleship of his original readers is among his chief concerns.

Mary Ann Tolbert argues persuasively that Mark's narrative employs a common device in the literature of his time which casts characters into types. Mark's disciples are not merely historical characters who accompanied Jesus. The disciples' experience corresponds with that of Mark's first audience. Mark's readers find

themselves in the story in the disciple characters.

Tolbert goes on to explain that the fear and failure of the Markan disciples does not serve as positive model for disciples in his reading audience. Rather, the disciples in the narrative often serve as negative examples. Finding the companions of Jesus facing and failing in situations similar to their own, Mark's readers come to a fresh appreciation of Jesus' faithfulness. In turn the audience resolves to do better in its own discipleship.

The negative characterization of the disciples has at least two related effects on readers. In the first place, because, as we have seen, irony is one of the most common devices used against the disciples in Mark, the audience is made to feel superior to the disciples in knowledge and understanding time and again. The audience shares the views of Jesus and the narrator in opposition to the actions of Peter, James, John, Judas, and the others. For example, while the disciples cannot fathom how Jesus will be able to feed the four thousand in the desert (8.3-4), the audience knows he will do it, just as he earlier fed the five thousand (6.35-44); and while the disciples sleep in Gethsemane, the audience hears Jesus' prayer and shares his pain. These incidents and many others contribute to making the audience better than the disciples, but the effect is actually even greater, for portraying the disciples as failing foils to Jesus manipulates the reader to respond by becoming a better disciple.⁴⁵

Mark's presentation of discipleship is made even more complex by the resurrection. In the gospel's final scene a young man tells the mourning women that the risen Jesus will meet the disciples in

⁴⁵Ibid. p. 223-4.

Galilee. In view of the disciples' recent apostasy, this announcement at the empty tomb is staggering good news. Just at the point when it is inescapable that the disciples correspond to the rocky ground type in the Parable of the Sower, the disciples are restored to fellowship with the Risen Lord.

To summarize: the Gospel According to Mark is a powerful vehicle for presenting a complex and penetrating vision of both God's presence in Jesus Christ and the appropriate human response to that presence. Though the situation of the authorial audience⁴⁶ is uncertain, it is clear that Mark seeks to address his readers' Christian experience by presenting an extended narrative of Jesus' career and the parallel careers of his disciples. The very format or genre which Mark uses brings to the fore several elements of the disciples' experience which may not have been clear or developed before. They are as follows.

1. Discipleship is a journey. Mark's narrative is littered

⁴⁶The term employed by Tolbert (op. cit.) meaning, "...the writer's vision of an ideal reader, the reader who would fulfill the reader's role implied in the text in the way it was designed to be done. Even the real flesh-and-blood first hearers of the Gospel may well not have been able to actualize successfully what the author envisioned, but they were considerably better prepared to accomplish that act than modern readers are. (p. 53).

with references to the movements of Jesus and his followers. Movement in Mark is related to the complexity of discipleship. To stay in one place would permit only one or two understandings of who Jesus is and what response is appropriate. Thus Galilee gives way to Jerusalem because discipleship is not only preaching and healing, but also suffering. The Mount of Transfiguration gives way to the scene which follows because the eschatological vision of Jesus does not mean aloofness from the world. Other movements permit successive manifestations of the Christ which in turn enrich the disciples.

2. Discipleship is patterned after Jesus' ministry. Not only do disciples share Jesus' path, they also share the hardships of his life (10.28), his service to others (9.35), his eschatological message and authority (3.13), his suffering at the hands of an evil generation (8.34), and his destiny (13.27; 10.30).

3. Finally, discipleship can tolerate human failure. Mark characterizes Jesus' disciples as people who demonstrate great faith and obedience early in the journey. Later, their insight and trust flags. They even abandon Jesus completely in Gethsemane, implicitly renouncing their earliest commitment to follow. Nevertheless, the disciples are never abandoned by Jesus. This is demonstrated in the empty tomb conversation between the women and the young man. Only the more lengthy gospel format would permit this kind of character development--a development which doubtless addresses the

difficulties of every disciple even to the present.

b. Mark's Miracles and Exorcisms

Some of Mark's readers may conclude that the blindness and failure of the Markan disciples disqualifies them as models of appropriate Christian faith. Perhaps other characters in Mark--namely, the recipients of healings--are more adequate Christians and thus should be the focus of our study of conversion. This opens a question which this study cannot evade. Who, among Mark's characters, embody the correct response to Jesus? Alternatively, perhaps Mark presents a variety of options for response. Maybe there are levels or degrees of devotion represented in Mark.

We could add to these questions the scholarly puzzlement over divisions within the Markan disciples. The Twelve is a subgroup within the broader group of disciples. There are The Four (13.3), The Three, and Peter alone. There are disciples, such as Levi or Bartimaeus, who are named in the text but are not included among the Twelve.

All of these questions have received ample attention elsewhere. Understanding the function of subgroups within the disciples is a particularly nettlesome exegetical problem with no clear solution emerging. Further, I know of no study which suggests that Mark's intention is to disqualify discipleship and set forth another type of faith response as a more appropriate reaction to Jesus. As for

other levels or degrees of faith represented by receivers of Jesus' healing or exorcism, I reject them in this paper for the following reasons.

1. Mark, as a new literary genre, gathers a variety of stories and forms. If the characters associated with these are Mark's exemplars of faith, then why did he write a gospel? It is more plausible that he wrote as he did to present the fuller, more complex response of the characters who follow Jesus through scene after scene--the disciples.

2. The miracles and exorcisms cease with Bartimaeus' healing in the Tenth Chapter. If Mark is putting forward the faithful recipients of miracles as models of faith, then why don't they appear in the crucial Passion section?

3. Some of the healing stories have rhetorical aims designed to illuminate the disciples' experience. The twice touched blind man in 8.22ff clearly launches the discipleship section which follows. This pericope serves as a metaphor for the half-sighted, half-blind disciples whose foibles are prominent in the story in the following 2 1/2 chapters. Put bluntly, some of Mark's healings are about discipleship.

4. Some miracles are about the clash of the inbreaking Kingdom of God with the prevailing order. Mark's Jesus moves through a sinful and evil world. Healing and exorcisms make christological and eschatological points. The beneficiaries are fortunate

recipients of a goodness and liberation which is breaking in and will eventually triumph.

5. This is not to dismiss the exemplary faith shown by healed persons. In this respect, their confidence in Jesus is appropriate and enables his power to be manifested.⁴⁷ Again, though the recipients of miracles are one-dimensional. They embody the power of faith. Mark's disciples and audience can benefit from their example with respect to faith. Healed persons do not exemplify the entire Christian life. Says Best:

There must have been many in Mark's community who were drawn to it by the charismatic activity of some of its members; they must be helped to understand the need to grow beyond the miracles for these alone cannot bring them to true faith. Hence, the miracles taper away after 8.27. Those who have seen the miracles and got as far as 8.27 are "on the way" (8.27; 9.33; 10.32, 52), but a long and difficult path still lies before them in which they must pick up the cross and deny themselves...It is the same for Christians, and as they go on that further path and towards the cross and resurrection they can begin to understand the miracles more fully and realize that they do not have to travel alone and unsupported. Jesus is with them to help them grasp the meaning of their faith and assist them through the trial and the difficulties that lie before them.⁴⁸

In examining how the first Gospel writer portrays the life of

⁴⁷Ibid. p. 187.

⁴⁸Ernest Best: Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel According to Mark. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) p. 196.

faith for insights about conversion, we will confine our discussion to Mark's presentation of discipleship.

c. Repent

The first phase of Fackre's four point turning of conversion is repentance, the turning from the powers of darkness. The New Testament word group for repentance includes metanoia (repentance) and metanoeo (I repent). Literally, the marriage of meta ("after," "with," or "around") with nous ("mind," "understanding," "thought") suggests a range of meanings from "afterthought," to "adopt another view," to "change of feelings." By New Testament times the word became part of the conventional terminology for conversion. Behm, writing in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament and arguing for conversion as the appropriate rendering of metanoia offers this provocative sentence:

For as the call metanoeite which Jesus issued in the steps of the Baptist is construed as an emotional appeal: "Feel sorry," or as a stirring of the whole consciousness: "Change your mind," or as a demand for acts of expiation for wrongs committed: "Do penance," or as a summons to a radical change in the relation of God to man and man to God: "Convert," "be converted," so according to these various interpretations there will be radically different understandings of the message of Jesus.⁴⁹

⁴⁹Behm and Wurthwein: Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, translated by Geoffrey

For our study of Mark we will attempt to understand the concept in its respective contexts. Mark employs the word group a scant three times, compared with Matthew's seven and Luke's fourteen. John doesn't use them at all. Curiously, those occurrences in Mark all use the word to characterize the content of preaching. The first pertains to that of John, then Jesus, and finally the Twelve. We will consider these in turn.

1.) John the Baptist, 1.(1-3), 4-8

The advent of Jesus Christ in Mark's Gospel is heralded by a wilderness preacher whose style and message harks back to that of the Old Testament prophets. John's clothing and lifestyle (1.6) are reminiscent of the prophet Elijah. John's ministry recalls expectations that Elijah would reappear before the messianic age.⁵⁰ This is confirmed in Jesus' cryptic remark in 9.13 which states that the expected return of Elijah has been accomplished, presumably in the person of John the Baptist.

Unlike Matthew, and to a lesser degree Luke, Mark does not present John as an apocalyptic figure, but as one whose message and baptism recall Old Testament tradition. If we agree with Tolbert that the Parable of the Tenants provides a scheme for understanding

W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) Volume IV, p. 1000.

⁵⁰See Zechariah 13.4; Malachi 3.1, 4.5; and I Kings 19.2,10.

the eschatological significance of Jesus' ministry, then John corresponds to the many messengers who are sent before the coming of the heir. John's beheading may be linked with the head wound of one of those many servants (12.4). Tolbert's argument that John is not an apocalyptic preacher is even stronger if we agree with her exegesis of 1.2-3. She concludes that these verses refer to Jesus, not the Baptizer.⁵¹

John's call for repentance-baptism for forgiveness of sins is not equivalent to Jesus' call for repentance as response to the Kingdom's arrival. John belongs to a prior moment in Mark's scheme of salvation history. The two periods are divided by John's arrest in 1.14. Only after the conclusion of John's work does Jesus begin his. Even John's remarks about the "mightier one" (1.7) make it clear that the coming ministry and baptism are qualitatively different from that of the Baptizer.

John's function in Mark's eschatology helps clarify the meaning of his ministry and baptism. It is conversionist and evokes recollection of Old Testament traditions. It was a distinctive prophetic understanding that YHWH's judgment could be averted if the covenant people would turn from their sins, individual and corporate, and return to God.⁵² Repentance or returning to YHWH in the Old

⁵¹Tolbert, p. 108ff.

⁵²Behm and Wurthwein: Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.

Testament often was made tangible in cultic expressions such as general fasting, sackcloth and ashes, penitential liturgies, and the like.⁵³

Baptism at the hands of John, was a purification rite probably associated with the proselyte ritual cleansings of the time. To receive baptism from John was to humble oneself to the status of a Gentile needing cleansing in order to be incorporated into the community to which the future Messiah would come. Mark twice associates personal sin with John's baptism. Thus, repentance in this context clearly entails a contrite turning from evil as a way of preparing for the Messianic age.

In Fackre's article repentance is turning from sin in response to the presence of the New Age. Mark's first use of repentance, on the other hand, is turning from sin in anticipation of the New Age. Common to both is the element of making a conscious, contrite break with one's past evil behavior.

2.) Jesus' Preaching 1.14-15

Several verses later Mark's second use of "repentance" appears, this time on the lips of Jesus himself. There is consensus among interpreters that this two verse passage summarizes Jesus' work and

Volume IV, p. 985.

⁵³Ibid. p. 980-1.

message.⁵⁴ Moreover, the text commends itself as important to Mark's purpose on at least two counts:

First, the expression "gospel of God" reiterates Mark's opening words (1.1), and suggests that what follows is the essence of the narrative.

Second, only Mark among the four evangelists uses the expression, "the time is fulfilled" (peplerotai). Such an assertion in the passive, perfect, indicative is unparalleled in the New Testament. Nowhere else is the kingdom so present.⁵⁵

At any rate, the two perfect indicatives, that the "time has been fulfilled" and that the "Kingdom of God has drawn near" are followed by two imperatives, namely Jesus' call to "repent" and "believe."

The reader might expect the narrative after this anticipatory overview to take up instances where people recognize the Kingdom's presence by repenting and believing. In fact, Mark frequently mentions--explicitly and implicitly--belief or faith. Pistis and pisteuo appear eighteen times throughout the gospel. But metanoia appears only once. More significantly, not one instance of penitential turning from sin occurs in response to Jesus. Neither does Jesus, after 1.15, call for contrition as part of the

⁵⁴Tolbert, p. 114-5.

⁵⁵Kelber, p. 9.

"threshold commitment" of becoming a disciple.

John the Baptist enjoys great success in Mark in evoking repentance in the sense of confession and penitence. At first blush, Jesus call for repentance would seem to be in the same vein--a call for regret over past wickedness. But people's actual response to the Son of Man in the story reflects a more comprehensive "turning from" with scant reference to sin.

The section which follows 1.14-15 illustrates this. Tolbert points out that Mark's mention of the Sea of Galilee in 1.16 and 2.13 tie their respective pericopae with the introductory passage we discussed above.⁵⁶ We may conclude therefore that Mark wishes the reader to read these as examples of how people hear and respond to Jesus' message and invitation. Both lessons, 1.16-20 and 2.13-14, are stories of the calls of disciples. In neither does the text mention sin or turning from sin. In the case of the fishermen, Mark makes no mention of the moral quality of their lives. The reader may conclude that Levi--a tax collector--is a sinner. This is, however, not explicit in the story of his call. What Simon, Andrew, James, John, and Levi "turn from" is their work.

This pattern carries through the entire gospel. The rich man in 10.17-22 is particularly interesting. Clearly, he is righteous in accordance with the Law. "Teacher," he says to Jesus, "I have

⁵⁶Tolbert p. 132.

observed all of [the Law] from my youth." In other words, he doesn't need to turn from sin. What Jesus explicitly calls him to turn from is his wealth and, presumably, the lifestyle that accompanies it.

Likewise with Bartimaeus, whose story both closes the pre-Jerusalem section and Mark's discipleship chapters (8.22-10.52). Located in an auspicious point in Mark's structure, the Bartimaeus story epitomizes the meaning of discipleship. Says Tolbert:

...The episode of the healing of blind Bartimaeus has been carefully composed to combine elements related to the healed with elements related to the disciples. Bartimaeus not only typifies the fruitfulness of faith but also the faithfulness of the ideal follower of Jesus.⁵⁷

Significantly, what Bartimaeus turns from is his begging lifestyle symbolized by the casting off of his mantle (10.50). First century beggars spread their overcoats in front of them so that passersby could toss coins upon them. Mark's paradigmatic disciple, the man who "sees" most clearly what is required by Jesus' presence, shows no regret over sin as he takes up the road with Jesus.

Clearly, there is an element of "turning from" in all of the above pericopae. However, that from which new disciples turn is not sin so much as it is life style--to use a contemporary idiom. Sin is the focus of John's call to repentance. It is beside the point

⁵⁷Tolbert p. 190-1.

in Jesus' call. This is not to say that Jesus' disciples are not sinners. Early on, Jesus is criticized for his choice of sinful table companions, many of whom were "followers" (2.5ff). "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (2.17). These followers, however, turn from something more comprehensive than sin.

3.) The Preaching of the Twelve

We learn in this pericope that the Twelve undertake all forms of Jesus' mission including his preaching the necessity of repentance (6.13). Repentance here serves to characterize the content of the disciples' message. The text supplies no information about the meaning of repentance itself, nor is the reader given examples of people who respond to the disciples' call. Given the pericope which follows--the story of John the Baptist's execution--the reader is left with a grim commentary on the fate of those who call for repentance.

This text may also serve to link future apostolic proclamation with Jesus' preaching. In other words, when the primitive church went forth calling for repentance, it was not acting presumptuously. The commission for such preaching originates in Jesus' lifetime with the first disciples.

Because "repentance" characterizes the disciples' preaching, we can presume that the concept is important to Mark. Unfortunately we know little more about repentance here than we know from its use

in other Markan contexts and its definition, namely that people should completely re-think their lives.

4.) "Turning From" Along the Way

As the disciples' experience with Jesus develops so does their awareness of what discipleship asks them to leave behind. Jesus' comments about the unshrunk cloth and the old wineskins (2.18ff) hint at how complete is the transformation required to embrace the new reality that Jesus brings. Later, in preparing the Twelve for their missionary foray, Jesus requires his followers to abandon all material things except those which are necessary for preaching and exorcism (6.7-13).

Mark further develops this idea in the section of the story which follows the first passion prediction (8.22-10.52). Here the disciples begin to reckon with how completely discipleship demands that they forsake life itself. Following Jesus is like the condemned person's self-abandonment when he or she picks up a cross and walks to the site of execution (8.34). All hope for legal appeal or pardon is abandoned. In other words, every attainment or element of status must be forsaken in the journey with Jesus. This includes status as receivers of the eschatological vision of Jesus (9.2ff), status among the disciples themselves (9.30ff), status in belonging to the group with Jesus (9.38ff), status as being an adult (9.42; 10.13ff), status in choosing to be a disciple in the first place (10.27ff),

and status in the life to come (10.35ff). If the initial decision to follow Jesus requires people to lay aside the responsibilities of the moment, continuing to follow requires disciples to forsake life--and all that means life--itself.

Mark's much-discussed secrecy theme is relevant to the meaning of "repentance" in the second gospel. Put bluntly, Jesus does not wish to be "known" (1.34, 3.12, 5.46, 7.24) in a limited or inadequate way. Consequently, he suppresses publicity and avoids crowds that may be attracted to a simplistic notion of who Jesus is. The disciples also need time and discipleship experience to come to full insight on who Jesus is and what following him entails. It would follow that even far into the journey with Jesus, the disciples would be discovering new things about their master and "changing their minds" or having "afterthoughts" about their own attitudes and behavior. It is significant that the one example of dramatic sorrow over one's behavior comes when Peter weeps following his three-fold denial of his master (14.72). Coming so late in the story, this is a good indication that the disciples--represented by Peter--are still learning; still making mistakes, and regretting their failures.

A final clue which may reveal how Mark views the transformation of disciples emerges in Tolbert's discussion of Mark's strategy to influence the authorial audience.

The problem posed by the epilogue in strong rhetorical terms through the unfulfilled expectations raised by the named

women is, if these followers will not go and tell, who will? In the end, Mark's Gospel purposely leaves each reader or hearer with the urgent and disturbing question: What type of earth am I? Will I go and tell? Indeed, one's response to the seed sown by the Gospel of Mark reveals in each listener's heart, as did Jesus' earlier preaching, the presence of God's ground or Satan's.⁵⁸

Implicit in the entire Gospel is a call to faithfulness greater than that exhibited by the disciples in the story. If Tolbert's insights are accurate here then Mark--writing for a Christian community--is calling for a kind of repentance among his disciple readers. Clearly all the "turning from" is not at the point of entry into the Christian life.

5.) Conclusion

Given the above observations, we can begin to draw conclusions about the adequacy of Fackre's image of conversion, or at least the element of repentance. Fackre's reader is left with a visual impression that conversion, true to the word, is a personal revolution. This revolution is a course correction before striking out on a new tack. Such a personal revolution is of deep personal significance and precedes a dramatic new life course.

Mark's image of discipleship and the point of entry into discipleship, is linear. Discipleship is a journey with Jesus with the cross as a destination. In Mark's gospel, the launching of this

⁵⁸Tolbert, p. 298-9.

journey must have had profound impact on the lives of those called. However, the text plays this down. The fishers drop their nets as if Jesus were calling them to lunch, not a new life.

Both Fackre's convert and Mark's disciple repent of something or leave something behind. In Fackre's scheme, the "something" is sin. In Mark's, the disciple begins by dropping work and family and concludes by dropping life itself. The difference is twofold. First, Mark sees repentance as a process which continues throughout the journey. Second, Mark's "turning from" is much more profound. Ultimately it is self-mortification. Fackre breathes not a word about taking up a cross. Despite Fackre's stern insistence on a serious attitude towards human depravity, his repentance demands less than does Jesus. The Rich Young Man would have had no problem being a convert in Fackre's scheme.

Fackre's convert differs in other ways from Mark's disciple. The convert's "threshold commitment" is so packed with spiritual insight and achievement that the rest of the Christian journey pales in comparison. It is as if conversion is the paradigm for the Christian life. Fackre all but says this:

That pilgrimage consists of the re-enactment in via of the commitments made at the inception of the journey. Each aspect of turning is relived as a step along the way.⁵⁹

⁵⁹Fackre, p. 188-9.

The reader is left to believe that Fackre's convert is suddenly a theologian, able to recognize that the powers of darkness are dethroned. Moreover, he or she is also a moral exemplar, able to perceive and shake off complicity with sin.

The threshold into Markan discipleship is not nearly so revolutionary. The disciples simply drop what they are doing and fall in behind Jesus. They don't need to understand the inbreaking of the new age and the conflict with evil that it brings. Neither do they need to grasp where their journey with Jesus will take them. All they do is take the first step.

For churches that put forth conversion as the decisive moment of repentance, Mark provides a corrective. The disciples' first steps with Jesus, while significant, hardly bring total transformation. There remained, down the road, many attitudes and yearnings that will also be left behind as were the boats and nets in the beginning.

D. Believe

Fackre's second turning point of conversion is faith. If the Christians's "threshold commitment" entails turning from something, it also entails turning towards something. Fackre presents faith as acceptance of the Christian kerygma. His impressionistic style offers several images which work together to suggest a multifaceted meaning of conversion faith. For example, faith acknowledges the

"fresh situation," the breaking of a "spell," the open future, Christ's disarming of the "principalities and powers," and so on.

1.) The Word Group

Fackre's images of faith correspond with the broad sweep of Christian and New Testament usage. The Greek work group which includes pisteuo (I believe) and pistis (belief, faith) came to be, in primitive Christianity, "the leading term for the relation of [people] to God."⁶⁰ While "faith's" New Testament occurrences convey multiple nuances--everything from trust to hope to belief in the Christian message--its dominant use means acceptance of the kerygma.

The first occurrence of pisteuo in Mark (1.15) would seem to be consistent with both Fackre's definition and general New Testament usage. Says Jesus: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." The object of faith here is "the gospel" which summarizes that which Jesus preaches. Elsewhere in Mark, "gospel" designates the Christian message. Except for 1.1 and 1.14, Mark always places "gospel" on the lips of Jesus. On two occasions Jesus refers to both himself and the gospel in a sentence (8.35 and 10.29). On two other occasions Jesus uses "gospel" to designate that which will be preached to the world (13.10

⁶⁰Rudolph Bultmann: Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.
Vol. VI. p. 205.

and 14.9). While Mark does not equate the "gospel" with Jesus, he is variously associated with it. Thus, in the context of this "programmatic summary" of the events which will follow (1.14,15), believing is the Christian's embrace of the glad tidings about Jesus.

As events unfold in Mark's narrative, "faith" does not refer so much to a believing assent to the Christian message as an attitude of trust in Jesus himself. Various forms of the word group for "faith," "believing," or "unbelieving" appear eighteen times in Mark. Eleven of these refer--not to acceptance of a message--but to confidence in Jesus' (or God's) power to do the miraculous. The remaining occurrences, including the use of pisteuo in 1.15, have to do with assent or intellectual belief.

2.) Belief in Disciples

In the calls of the fishers and Levi, which we have linked to 1.14-15, the new disciples don't show faith about Jesus, but in Jesus. They respond to the inviter and his invitation, not to a message about Jesus, or the eschatological situation, or whatever. This pattern is repeated with Levi's call. Passing along by the sea, Jesus enlists Levi at the tax office. It is not a message that draws the tax collector, but the attractiveness of Jesus' self.

Bartimaeus, the paradigmatic disciple, shows faith, not in a message, but in Jesus himself. Mark's ironic use of blindness and sightedness in this story leaves the reader with the impression that

Bartimaeus is far less "blind"--in the sense of understanding--than are the struggling disciples. What Bartimaeus "sees" and believes in is Jesus himself--both his power to heal and the wisdom of his journey.

Jesus' call to "believe in the gospel" (1.15), is answered throughout the story in spontaneous response to Jesus himself. In the case of the disciples, they enlist with Jesus quickly and follow. As Mark's plot develops, the reader learns repeatedly that the disciples believe very little about the "gospel." Their slowness to understand teaching (4.10; 10.10 etc.), their growing faithlessness in the two sea crossing episodes (4.35ff; 6.45ff), their failure to grasp the necessity of the cross (8.32) and the cross-bearing lifestyle (8.22-10.52), all point to their failure to understand and accept any grand scheme of God's unfolding work in the world. All that the disciples succeed at is clinging to Jesus personally.

3.) Faith in the Miracle Stories

Mark further illustrates "faith" in the many healing stories that are sprinkled through his first ten chapters. Miracles and exorcisms are particularly illustrative of Mark's understanding of faith. Unlike Hellenistic miracle stories which present faith as the result of the miraculous event,⁶¹ Mark sees the miracle as depen-

⁶¹Eduard Schweizer: "The Portrayal of the Life of Faith in the Gospel of Mark" in Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology.

dent on faith.⁶² Says Tolbert: "Mighty works are the result of the interaction of Jesus and people of faith."⁶³ Thus, in Mark, faith appears to be a prior condition rather than a response.

This is explicit in two pericopae where Jesus discusses faith as such. First, in the story of the epileptic boy (9.14-29), Jesus makes it clear both to the boy's father and later to the disciples, that total reliance on God through belief and prayer is the only way that the healing can take place. Second, and more powerfully, following the cursing of the fig tree, Jesus teaches that prayer offered without doubt can even uproot mountains and cast them into the sea (11.23). Positioned in the context of the fruitless fig tree, this comment to the disciples is about fruitfulness--an abiding Markan concern. Faith is the human attitude which releases into the world the power of God's inbreaking new age.

Because miracles are occasioned by faith, not vice versa, Jesus twice refuses to perform for the faithless. Those who do not possess faith in Mark are not given evidence in the form of signs or miracles which might foster belief. Jesus refuses to give a sign from heaven

(Richmond Virginia: Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, October, 1978) Volume XXXII, No. 4. p. 395.

⁶²Tolbert p. 180.

⁶³Ibid. p. 181.

(8.11-12), nor does he come down from the cross to kindle belief in mocking onlookers (15.32).

That Jesus' ability to work miracles is dependent on faith is further shown in the fact that when characters' faith wavers the miracles cease. Amid much doubt and fear among the disciples, Jesus ceases to perform healings by the end of the tenth chapter. Even before this, miracles seem to become more difficult for Jesus. Early in the story, Jesus' mere command or touch could cleanse the leper (1.41) or mobilize the paralytic (2.11). As official opposition to Jesus grows and the disciples begin to show doubt, healings entail more effort, even struggle. By the seventh chapter, the deaf mute requires multiple gestures, spittle, and a prayer (7.31-37). The blind man, a chapter later, requires spittle, a touch, and then a second touch (8.22-26).

So, Mark's inaugural capsule of Jesus' ministry, (i.e. "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel") is followed not by tales of people embracing good tidings about the kingdom. It is followed by stories of people trusting Jesus and, to a lesser extent, God. The stories of faith in Mark are about the variety of ways that people expect everything from Jesus and nothing from their own piety or power.⁶⁴ Faith in Mark is trust in the potential of Jesus more than it is acceptance

⁶⁴Schweizer, p. 396.

of proclamation about him. The disciples' faith is a response to Jesus which is independent of any proclamation about him. Indeed Mark's Jesus cannot be understood with his cross. So the disciples' following of Jesus is not a response to his triumph or salvific work. It reflects no awareness of the eschatological situation. The disciples merely drop in behind him and let the journey carry them where it will.

Likewise with those healed. Their faith is anything but a response to good news. They don't care about a message. This is evident on two occasions when sick people interrupt Jesus preaching with their requests. The leper's plea (1.40) delays Jesus' planned preaching and exorcism excursion in the "next towns" (1.38). And the paralytic being lowered through the roof brings Jesus' preaching to a stop (2.2). Most of those healed in Mark manifest faith which is not only independent of proclamation about Jesus, but also prior to the manifestation of his power on their behalf.

This latter point is demonstrated repeatedly when the sick or possessed display extraordinary effort in overcoming obstacles to bring their plea to Jesus. The leper defies purity laws (1.40), the paralytic's friends battle a crowd (2.4), the woman with the hemorrhage must pursue Jesus (5.33f), the Syrophenician woman must persevere against an initial refusal (7.27), Bartimaeus must shout above Jesus' followers (10.48).⁶⁵ In these instances, faith is

⁶⁵Ibid. p. 395.

confidence--sometimes strong confidence--in the potential of Jesus to manifest great power.

If faith in Mark is a trusting response to Jesus personally; if it tends to manifest itself in some and not others, where does such belief originate? Mark does not address this question directly. However, he gives some tantalizing clues in the three parables about seeds in the fourth chapter. Mary Ann Tolbert makes much of the Parable of the Sower, asserting that its rhetorical function is to provide a metaphorical guide for the reader to interpret the material which follows.⁶⁶ In brief, the parable's four soils which receive the sower's seed correspond to four types of people who hear Jesus' word. Just as the seed succeeds according to the type of soil it lands upon, so does Jesus' word succeed according to the type of person who hears it. Response to Jesus' word (faith?) is predetermined. The seed does not create receptive soil. Neither does the word create a receptive hearing. The predisposition to respond one way or another is an accomplished fact before the word is proclaimed. Some people--a curious mix of characters--simply perceive in Jesus something of his significance. These respond expectantly and the fruit of the kingdom is manifested in their lives. As for the source of their insight, their faith--we can only wonder if it is not the grace of God.

⁶⁶Tolbert, p. 121ff.

4.) Conclusion

For Fackre, conversion entails the believing embrace of Jesus' triumph--especially the triumph of his cross and resurrection. At the same time, Fackre's conversion faith entails confidence about Jesus' coming victory over sin and evil. God's triumph in Jesus Christ is the light that is seen and believed as part of the "threshold commitment."

Faith in Mark is less agreement with proclamation about Jesus than it is response to Jesus. Despite Jesus' inaugural words about believing the gospel, most occurrences of "faith" in Mark are primarily references to personal trust. Thus when the disciples take up with Jesus they know little if anything about their new master. Yet they trust him entirely.

One wonders if Mark's disciples, at the point of their call from their occupations could even experience Fackre's conversion faith. Jesus, at that point, had not fully triumphed over evil. His passion and resurrection were well in the future. His disciples may not have even known who they were following. Indeed, by the eighth chapter, when Jesus' followers were discovering what Christianity really entailed, they were horrified.

Conversion faith for Fackre assumes that the new believer, upon entry into the Christian life, grasps Jesus' significance and understands his triumph. Mark, in presenting the career of Jesus

with his passion at the end of the story, presents discipleship as a journey into understanding. Indeed, the cross is one of the final and certainly most difficult elements that the disciples encounter. Further, Mark's disciples' faith founders through the whole middle section of their journey. Their confidence and trust was clearly shaken as they draw near to Jerusalem. Following the resurrection and reunion in Galilee, the disciples' faith, presumably, is renewed and deepened. The disciples' faith then changes and develops through the journey. It is not a static quality from the beginning of life with Jesus.

Fackre's description of conversion faith fatally understates the necessity of journey. Further, he says nothing of the trust in Jesus that is exhibited by each person of faith in Mark's narrative. Fackre does acknowledge the element of trust in Christian faith by mentioning it once. But what he describes in detail is belief or agreement with the Christian doctrines. Thus, the "light" which Fackre's convert sees is the truth of Christian faith. Reading Mark prompts the question, how much "light" can the convert see at first sighting? The Markan disciples saw enough in Jesus to drop their work and follow. Can we expect more of new Christians today?

Contemporary churches that emphasize conversion as a crucial point of entrance into the Christian life can learn from Mark that the convert's initial understanding--however glorious and life-changing--will never be complete. Conversionist or revi-

valistic traditions, therefore, would do well to match their emphasis on the conversion experience with equal emphasis on the Christian journey. Support for the pilgrimage might take the form of ministries which provide instruction in prayer, acceptance of faith crises, and theological dialogue which celebrates evolving convictions. All of these would be ways the Christian community could express acceptance and encouragement of change which is always part of the pilgrimage.

Liberal traditions which minimize conversion need to acknowledge and develop an understanding that the Christian life has a clear beginning. Central to that understanding should be emphasis on the individual's trust in and obedience to Jesus personally. Mark envisions the Christian life as the result of listening to, obeying, and trusting in Jesus. If the texts concerning the calls of the fishermen, Levi, the Rich Man, and Bartimaeus teach us anything, it is that discipleship demands a clear break with something in our style of living so to pursue this relationship. Non-conversionist traditions cannot evade this.

E. Be Baptized

1.) Baptism

Fackre describes the third turning point of conversion under the heading of "baptism." By this he means initiation into the Christian Community:

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Baptism is one phase of conversion that marks the process as more than a change of heart and head. It is a change of location. It means new relationships and a new community.⁶⁷

As with repentance and faith, Fackre's conception of baptism here is drawn from church tradition after baptism had developed both in the New Testament period and beyond.

Baptism as Christian initiatory rite is neither mentioned explicitly nor symbolically in Mark.⁶⁸ Mark is unique in this respect, for baptism has clearly taken its familiar Christian shape in Matthew (28.19), Luke-Acts, John (4.1), and Paul's letters. Baptism in Mark, however, is chiefly associated with John the Baptist. In this context, it is an eschatological rite of repentance, not a Christian initiatory practice.

As mentioned in our discussion of the Parable of the Tenants, Mark's John the Baptist, represents the final servant sent by the master to elicit fruitfulness from the vineyard's tenants. His preaching of the coming "mightier one" and his preparatory baptism of repentance belong to a period of salvation history prior to the time of the heir.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Fackre, p. 182.

⁶⁸With the possible exception of 10.38.

⁶⁹Tolbert, p. 244.

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The baptism of Jesus (1.9-11), moreover, is not so much a model or prototype of Christian baptism as it is part of the setting for the manifestation of Jesus' identity.

The Markan prologue, like the proemium of the epic, drama, or history, functions to introduce major elements in the story to the reader. Most important, it establishes Jesus, through a series of reliable witnesses, to be the evaluative center of the story to come.⁷⁰

So Mark's reader learns in the prologue that Jesus is part of John's renewal movement. Jesus accepts baptism at John's hands. At the same time the text makes it clear that a more important time is dawning. This scene, with John's proclamation, the descending Spirit and the voice from heaven, propels Jesus, in the reader's estimation, beyond the Baptizer's sphere into a more important ministry of his own. In sum, baptism in Mark's prologue is somewhat beside the point. It has not developed into the initiatory rite it would later become. Rather, it belongs to an earlier strata of Christian tradition than that which informs Fackre.

Mark's only other reference to being baptized (apart from passages referring to John the Baptist) occurs in 10.38-39. In this scene, James and John have requested positions of honor when Jesus is glorified. "Baptism" here refers to Jesus' ultimate servitude and impending death. It is possible that "baptism" in this context

⁷⁰Ibid. p. 112.

has a sacramental connotation. It appears along with the cup (which Jesus will drink). Mention of the "cup" links this text with the Last Supper (14.23) and the "cup" in Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (14.36). Both cup and baptism, then, are metaphors of Jesus' life-giving service.

Baptism has long been understood as a sign of the believer's incorporation into Jesus' death and resurrection. And it is probable that this connection is at least implied in this passage. But identity with Jesus' suffering is not exactly what Fackre is referring to when he uses "baptism" in his article. Fackre's "baptism" is enlistment in community. Mark's baptism is sign-act of repentance and later a metaphor of self-giving. In short, there is not much unity around this concept.

2.) Community

Fackre and Mark do, however, find much common ground in their ideas about Christian community. Fackre writes in a thoroughly secularized generation where people tend to consign conversion to the private sphere of personal thoughts. Fackre resists this by asserting that the conversion experience is essentially unfinished until it brings the new believer into the company of other converts.

Privatism is not Mark's concern. But by making the journey with Jesus the paradigm for discipleship, Mark leaves no possibility for conversion without community. The sociological element of

discipleship in Mark--joining the group--coincides with repentance and faith. The disciples continue together until they forsake Jesus and scatter in 14.50. The reader may presume that the disciple group is reconstituted in Galilee after the resurrection for continued ministry. While this reunion is not narrated, the young man at the tomb points to it in 16.7 and Jesus predicts it in 14.28, 14.25, and 13.27. Further, Jesus sends forth the disciples in pairs on their own missionary journey (6.7). At no point in the story is discipleship a private affair. No teaching of Jesus is directed privately to a single disciple, nor does any disciple act faithfully alone. Significantly, Judas' betrayal (14.44), Peter's denial (14.53ff), and the disciples' flight from Gethsemane are individual actions.

Ernest Best⁷¹ has uncovered several metaphors which Mark uses to describe the faith community. In 14.27 Jesus predicts the disciples unfaithfulness. In this context he describes the disciple company as a flock with Jesus as shepherd. The same metaphor is used of the crowd in 6.34. Best suggests the existence of eucharistic symbolism in this story, hinting to the authorial audience that Jesus feeds his people at unlikely times and places.⁷²

⁷¹Ernest Best, Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark: (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981) p. 208ff.

⁷²Ibid. p. 211.

Best further finds symbolism of Christ's community in Mark's twice mention of the "temple" in 14.58 and 15.29.⁷³ Likewise, the Second Gospel's consistent use of houses as places of withdrawal and instruction for disciples (7.17, 9.28, 9.33, 10.10, 13.34), and family images (3.35, 10.29) as metaphors for the quality of community life,⁷⁴ further suggests Mark's understanding of the collective nature of discipleship. Finally, Best finds community symbolism in Mark's use of ships (3.9, 4.35ff, 6.32, 6.45ff, 8.14). Ships separate Jesus and the disciples from the crowd, convey the group to sites of ministry, and serve as places of teaching.⁷⁵

The extent of Mark's use of these symbols indicates his interest in the communal nature of discipleship. Because Mark construes the Christian life as a journey with Jesus in his earthly ministry, he is presenting material which predates the establishment of the Christian Church. Therefore, he cannot write a full-blown ecclesiology. Nevertheless, by lacing the narrative with so many ecclesiastical images, Mark has clearly shown his emphasis on community.⁷⁶

⁷³Ibid. p. 213.

⁷⁴Ibid. p. 226.

⁷⁵Ibid. p. 320.

⁷⁶Ibid. p. 208.

The necessity of community in Mark is amplified by several passages which convey the quality which that community should take. Mark presents the new community of Jesus' followers as a cohesive, equalitarian group. The disciples cohere with one another because they have severed other social and familial ties, save marriage.⁷⁷ In leaving their boats, James and John abandon their father, their home environment, and their means of support. The continual traveling entailed in Mark's vision of discipleship implies significant personal, social upheaval. This was no small matter for the disciples and is acknowledged by Peter and Jesus alike in the conversation which follows the interview with the Rich Man (10.23ff). Here Jesus affirms God's role in making it possible for the abandonment of one's former life. In this respect, repentance and community merge in Mark's description of discipleship.

Jesus himself pioneers the forsaking of social and family ties for the sake of the new community. His seemingly harsh response to the arrival of his mother and brothers (3.31-35) is indication that Jesus himself had made the break that he requires of his followers. This passage moves on to assert that the disciple enclave replaces

⁷⁷Marriage is one prior relationship that Jesus does not require his disciples to forsake. Jesus' instructions in 10.2-9 are uncompromising in forbidding the dissolving of marriage. Further, the list of forsaken relationships in 10.29 does not include spouses.

traditional family ties.

The cohesion of the disciple community is further enhanced by the fact that it is the special recipient of Jesus' instruction. Only Mark, among the gospels, construes Jesus' use of parables as a means of excluding the crowds from certain teaching (4.11).⁷⁸ Repeatedly, Mark's reader sees the disciples being isolated for special disclosures from Jesus. Examples abound. The telling of some parables is public. Only the disciples receive subsequent interpretation (4.10ff). The coming suffering and death of the Son of Man, Jesus discloses privately (8.31, 9.31, 10.33). The invitation to take up a cross which immediately follows the first passion prediction is offered to crowds and disciples alike. The most dramatic mysteries are revealed to sub-groups of disciples. Only Peter, James and John witness the raising of Jairus' daughter (8.51). The Transfiguration (9.2ff) and the apocalyptic discourse (chapter 13) are offered to three and four disciples respectively.

It would be an overstatement to describe the disciples in Mark as an esoteric community analogous to the Essenes, Gnostic groups, or mystery religions. Tolbert's exegesis of 4.10-12 reminds us that the secret of the kingdom remains a secret only for a brief time.⁷⁹ Mark's disciple group is not a clandestine enclave assembled around

⁷⁸Kee, p. 94.

⁷⁹Tolbert, p. 161.

special revelation. Its involvement in mission--as we shall see--vitiates against any radical sectarianism. Nevertheless, Mark's disciples are especially gifted with the most profound secrets. Even their inability to understand (6.52, 8.17) does not deter their master from repeatedly showing them wonders of God's work. This giftedness doubtless served to identify and bind together the disciples, and, by extension, the authorial audience.

Says Best:

Sociologically we know that shared knowledge unifies a group, serves to differentiate it from those who do not have the knowledge and makes it more conscious of itself as a group...⁸⁰

Mark envisions a disciple community which is not only cohesive, even family-like, but also mutually respectful and egalitarian. Mark addresses the quality of relationships within the community most intensively following the second passion prediction (9.31ff). Here, in a string of pericopae, Mark explicates the quality of community life necessary to endure and minister to the end of the age (13.13). The community is not hierarchical (9.33ff). Mutual service replaces any status system. Receiving children (9.37), the disenfranchised (9.39), and lowly members of the community (9.42) makes for peace (9.50) in the disciple community. Later, in the tenth chapter, Mark's reader confronts three individuals who do not

⁸⁰Best, p. 236.

embody the humility necessary for faithful community living. The rich man--to the amazement of the disciples--cannot follow (10.17ff). James and John's request for privileged places at Jesus' side is out of tune with the self-giving of their Lord (10.35ff). Says Jesus about the quality of disciple relationships:

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (10.42b-45)

The above demonstrates, though not exhaustively, the extent that Mark has woven community concerns into his work. Mark's decision to present the gospel as a narrative of Jesus' life precludes him from expounding a theology of the church directly. This makes all the more impressive the degree that Mark addresses community concerns.

3.) Conclusion

Once we become clear that Fackre uses the concept of baptism as a sign of entrance into Christian fellowship, while Mark makes little or no reference to baptism in this sense, we are in a position to see that both authors emphasize the necessity of joining the disciple community as part of the threshold commitment to Christian faith. Both Mark and Fackre, in their own way see joining the

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fellowship as coincidental with repentance and belief. Mark expresses this by portraying the disciples movement into the new community in the moment when they take up with Jesus. Fackre expresses this in part by quoting Lesslie Newbigin:

The idea that one is first converted, and then looks around to see what one should do as a consequence, finds no basis in scripture.⁸¹

Later, Fackre employs the image of the pilgrim--rather than the seated guru--as moving along a journey in the company of other pilgrims.⁸² This is very close to Mark's portrait of discipleship.

If we pressed both texts--Mark's and Fackre's--to find differences, we would have to cite Mark's emphasis on the depth of disciple relatedness. Mark envisions a new community which excludes other relationships. The new group is family-like. It is bound tightly because of the sacrifices disciples made to enter it in the first place. Further, Mark's community is non-hierarchical. Status is achieved paradoxically through servitude. Fackre mentions nothing of the exclusivity of the disciples' move into community and little about the quality of relationships in that community.

⁸¹Fackre p. 181. Quotation taken from Lesslie Newbigin, The Finality of Christ (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969), pp.93-94.

⁸²Ibid. p. 183.

Once again, the differences between the two visions of the threshold into the Christian life are in degree. Mark envisions a more radical move into community which intensifies down the discipleship road.

F. Serve

Fackre's final movement of conversion is service.

...The very act of conversion, of doing an about face, includes a bending down to offer the cup of cold water to those in need.⁸³

To see the light is also to see by the light. Thus, awareness of and response to the whole range of human need begins in the context of the conversion experience. Not only does this response entail social service but also social action. The latter is the convert's willingness to face and resist systemic evils which hurt and destroy.

1.) The Word Group

The New Testament words for "I serve" and "servant" are diakoneo and diakonos, respectively. Mark uses the former four times, the latter twice. Half of these (1.13, 1.31, and 15.41) refer to people's or angel's ministrations to Jesus. These instances have little to do with disciple service to the world. The remaining

⁸³Fackre, p. 184.

appearances of "service" or "servant" are found in 10.45, 9.35, and 10.43 and will be discussed below. Once again, Mark's use of a key word hardly exhausts what he has to say about the concept. In the case of service, Mark presents a sophisticated scheme of the disciples' mission to the world in general. To understand this service, we will work from later passages backwards towards the crucial call texts in the first and second chapters.

2.) Mark's Key Parables

Mary Ann Tolbert's explanation of the narrative function of the parables of the tenants and sower provides a conceptual framework for understanding, among other things, the role of the disciples. Mark's estimate of humanity's plight parallels the situation in the vineyard which is controlled by wicked tenants. As we have said above, the arrival of the vineyard owner's beloved son signals both the owner's patience and the finality of the situation. Following the heir's mistreatment and death comes the inevitability of the owner's wrathful return.

The parable serves Mark's purposes by revealing the eschatological situation. The advent of Jesus corresponds to the arrival of the heir. Jesus both heralds God's coming rule and manifests that sovereignty in his earthly career. The symbol Mark uses for this paradoxically realized and yet coming new order is the Kingdom of God. Jesus' ministry can be summed up as a general call

for fruitfulness in the light of the inbreaking Kingdom's collision with the wicked order which has prevailed.

Against this backdrop, Jesus' ministry in the world takes understandable shape. His primary objective is to announce the presence of God's Kingdom. Mark uses the Parable of the Sower to guide the reader in understanding how Jesus' "word" will fare in the world. This parable functions to describe his word's success or lack of success in bringing fruitfulness. In addition to preaching, Jesus also wages spiritual warfare against the demonic dominance of the present age. Mark understands the world as being dominated by a network of interconnected evil forces. These are manifested in demon possession, sickness, and corrupt religious and political leaders. All of these come into collision with the new order embodied in the Son of Man.

Both parables--Sower and Tenants--depict Jesus engaged in ministry to the world. Whether in his call for fruitfulness or his sowing of the word, Jesus is engaged in an outward-looking ministry involving all people.

Jesus enlists disciples to share his ministry of preaching, teaching, exorcism, healing, and ultimately cross-bearing. Curiously, the Parable of the Tenants contains no characters which correspond to the disciples or church. This may be a subtle attestation to the deep identity the disciples share with Jesus. This is, however not to suggest that disciples are indistinguishable

from Jesus. Jesus does have a unique function. Mark makes it clear that Jesus' life is given as the "ransom for many" (10.45); Jesus is manifested on the Mount of Transfiguration (9.2ff); Jesus is the focus of the proclamation to which disciples choose to be loyal (8.35). Though Jesus is unique in many ways, the disciples' journey is one of following and imitation.⁸⁴ Disciples are engaged in essentially the same outward-looking ministry that their Lord has undertaken. Because of this, and because Jesus interacts helpfully with the public, we may infer that service outside the faith community is essential to discipleship.

This is explicit in several texts throughout Mark's gospel. We will look at a few.

3.) The Commissioning and Sending of the Twelve,
(3.13-19, 6.7-13,30)

These two passages make explicit the nature of the Twelve's mission in the world. We deal with them together because they are related. Their relationship is not only in theme and key words, but also in Mark's narrative structure.⁸⁵ Those who are called by Jesus

⁸⁴Ernest Best: Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel According to Mark. (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1986) p. 13.

⁸⁵Tolbert has found 3.13-19a and 6.7-13 to be parallel to each other in a large chiastic pattern which embraces the entire section

to "be with him" (3.14) are also sent on a special mission. An actual missionary undertaking is described in 6.7-13,30. The list of the disciples' tasks includes preaching repentance, exorcism, healing, and teaching. These are precisely the activities of Jesus who himself preaches repentance (1.15), exorcises demons (1.23-28, 1.34, 1.39, etc.), heals (1.30, 1.34, 1.40ff etc.), and teaches (1.21, 2.2, etc.).

The missionary journey described in Mark's sixth chapter is a high point of faithfulness for the Twelve. Their success is unqualified and seems to be related to Jesus' call and commissioning (6.7, 3.13,14).⁸⁶

4.) Other Passages

a. 13.10

In this single verse, set in the midst of Mark's Apocalyptic Discourse, the reader is again given a glimpse of the nature of the disciples' world and mission. Mark's world, between the advent of

from 3.7-6.34. p. 143.

⁸⁶When Jesus "calls" someone in Mark, the summons often implies a special commission to discipleship (see the use of this term in 10.46-52). The disciples unauthorized and unsuccessful attempt to exorcise the demon that plagued the epileptic boy (9.14-29), was not preceded by Jesus' call.

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the heir and the final coming of the Son of Man on the clouds, is thoroughly decayed. Not only are people corrupted and wicked (13.8-9,12), but so is the cosmos itself (13.2ff,25). In this situation between the times, the gospel must be preached to all nations. We can presume that this is the disciples' task, for in the following verse Jesus discusses the result of preaching which will be visited upon the disciples, namely arrest and hatred for Jesus' name's sake. (13.11,13). In Mark's understanding of the world where one kingdom is breaking into another, the mere act of proclaiming God's reign is provocative enough to draw conflict. Thus, John the Baptist preached and was delivered up. Jesus preaches and is delivered up. The disciples preach and will be delivered up. Proclamation is a subversive act which calls people to forsake the present evil world order which is coming to an end in order to be free in the Kingdom of God. So intense is the conflict that merely enduring to the end (13.13) is to receive salvation. The temptation in the midst of the turmoil will be for disciples to dissociate with the name of Jesus (8.38). For this reason, Jesus instructs his followers to adopt an attitude which is ready to forsake life itself (8.35). The forsaking of life is where discipleship and mission meet in Mark. The cross, which the disciple is to take up, is imposed by the representatives of the world which is passing away.⁸⁷

⁸⁷Tolbert, p. 265.

b. 16.7

While Mark describes no resurrection appearances, this verse--the words of the young man at the tomb--commands the disciples to journey to Galilee. In Galilee they will meet Jesus and presumably resume the ministry of exorcism, healing, and preaching. Says Tolbert:

...Galilee represents the time of sowing, and the message of the empty tomb is that the time of sowing still continues, even perhaps for hard to cultivate types like the rocky Peter...And time will, indeed, run out, for the heir's death itself is the final provocation bringing the kingdom of God in all its glory to end the dominance of this evil generation and to install new tenants who will provide the fruit of the vineyard for its Creator.⁸⁸

Here then is the merger of following with service. The fact of Jesus' resurrection provides for the presence of Christ with the disciples. Jesus is raised and returns to Galilee and again calls the disciples to be with him. This arrangement, at the same time, is how disciples render service to all whom they encounter. Following Jesus, in turn, brings them into conflict with the evil of the present order, whether in the form of demons, sickness, or oppression by wicked leaders.

Best explains how this would have special meaning for the authorial audience:

⁸⁸Ibid. p. 298.

Mark has a special interest in the Gentiles; his congregation are Gentiles, and their mission must be exercised among Gentiles. The message to be given the disciples (16.7) says that they will see Jesus in Galilee...This will also be true for Mark's community; they will see, understand, the risen Jesus as they follow out their commission to fish for men (1.17), or, at least for some of them, as they preach and exorcise (3.14f), and as they experience suffering and rejection (the disciple can expect no better than his master and so can expect to be rejected by his family and friends, 6.1-6)⁸⁹

Thus, this announcement of the continuation of Jesus' ministry in Galilee provides continuity between the previous ministry of Jesus and his disciples before the Passion and the ministry of the Markan community among Gentiles. What can be said of the disciples' service while they followed Jesus in Mark's narrative can also be said of the service rendered by Mark's community.

c. The Great Feedings in 6.37-44 and 8.1-10

Werner Kelber⁹⁰ has argued persuasively that Mark's two mass feeding episodes, the geographic movements that accompany them, and the content of the related pericopae compose an elaborate argument for the inclusion of Gentiles in the ministry of the church. That Jesus feeds both Jews and Gentiles anticipates the inclusion of the latter in the coming Kingdom:

⁸⁹Best, p. 201.

⁹⁰Kelber, p. 48ff.

To accomplish his purpose he utilizes the symbols of bread, boat, lake, the two seashores and the six voyages. The boat trips are designed to dramatize, not a centrifugal course of action, spinning out from the Galilean center to ever more distant lands, but a unitive movement, alternating between the two sides of the sea. The lake, losing its force as a barrier, is transposed into a symbol of unity, bridging the gulf between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The two are the one. Galilee is no longer ethnically confined to either a Jewish or a Gentile Christian identity, rather "all of Galilee" is where Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians live together in the newness of the Kingdom.⁹¹

Part of this metaphoric scheme is Mark's symbolic use of the bread or loaf. Later in the Upper Room scene, the bread comes to represent Jesus' self and self-giving. In the feeding miracles, the loaves are symbols of the gospel--offered to both Jews and Gentiles. In 8.14-21, the solitary loaf is contrasted with the "leaven of Pharisees and the leaven of Herod," both representing forces which benefit from the separation of Jews and Gentiles. The disciples, fretting about a food shortage, are oblivious to the symbolic use of one loaf to represent the unifying ministry of Jesus as opposed to the divisiveness of the Pharisees and Herod who resists unity.⁹²

In view of this symbolism, Jesus' instructions for the disciples to "give them something to eat" (6.37) and to distribute the food

⁹¹Ibid. p. 62-3.

⁹²Ibid. p. 61-2.

(6.41, 8.6) is highly suggestive of their service to others. The disciples share the gospel with Jews and Gentiles alike. The image is of disciples in a servant role bearing the food from Jesus to the people--many people. If this interpretation is correct, these texts anticipate 13.10 which envisions the disciples preaching to all nations.

d. The Call of Disciples 1.16-20, 2.14

We have seen that discipleship in Mark entails service to neighbors near and far. To follow Jesus is to be engaged in many of his activities of helpfulness toward the outside world. The disciples' principle forms of service are preaching exorcism. These will continue even beyond the resurrection until the final triumph of Jesus' coming to gather his elect (13.27).

Such service is anticipated in the moment when Jesus first summons the fishers and Levi. Says Jesus, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of [people]. Here begins the Markan of Jesus both summoning and sending (3.14, 6.7, 16.7). Even the most cursory reading of the four fishermen's calls plus that of Levi reveals that these pericopae conform to a pattern. Jesus--moving--summons with the invitation to "follow." The disciple responds "immediately" leaving behind whatever he is doing. In the first call, that of Simon and Andrew, Jesus adds the commission about becoming fishers of [people]. Best asserts that the commission applies to James and John

as well:

Since in the latter the incident with James and John is tied so closely to that with Peter and Andrew it is reasonable to assume that Mark understood the saying as addressed to all four fishermen.⁹³

Jesus' summons will make the four fishers different kinds of fishers--fishers of people. Jesus' action of "making," (poiaso), is future indicative. In other words, the summons to discipleship contains the anticipation of service. This service is not realized at the moment of following. Luke's rendering of this scene expresses the element of commissioning so that it is realized immediately. "...Henceforth you will be catching [people]" (Lk 5.10).

The "fisher" metaphor for the disciples' service is not used again in Mark. It is clear that their ministry of preaching and calling people to repentance is a form of fishing for people. J. Manek has suggested that the disciples' task is to rescue people from the waters of chaos and evil.⁹⁴ This would be an apt way to describe the disciples' ministry as it is portrayed throughout the Second Gospel.

We can only speculate about any element of commissioning in the call of Levi (2.14). His first recorded action as a disciple is to

⁹³Best, p. 171.

⁹⁴J. Manek: "Fishers of Men," NT 2 (1958) p. 138-141.

host a party in his home where sinners and Jesus are brought together. Best suggests that Mark may have intended his reader to understand this act as a fulfillment of the commission given to Simon and Andrew.⁹⁵

5. Conclusion

Mark's vision of the disciples' missionary calling contains at least three prominent features which we will review here.

1. The disciples' mission is patterned after Jesus' service in the world. That Jesus had compassion for the sick, the demon-possessed, and oppressed is unassailable. Further, Jesus preaches to all people the good news of the present inbreaking of God's Kingdom. The disciples mission follows this pattern.

2. The disciples' mission is thoroughly tied to the eschatological situation. God's sovereignty is breaking into the present order of corruption and suffering. The collision of kingdoms is the essential conflict in Mark. Mark's social ethic--to borrow a contemporary concept--is always an expression of loyalty either to the present or coming order. Sickness, often expressed as demon possession, is a manifestation of the present control by demonic powers. When Jesus heals he engages in cosmic warfare which evokes resistance. When disciples undertake this mission at Jesus'

⁹⁵Best, p. 178.

bidding, they too enter into the eschatological conflict.

Preaching--announcing the presence of God's Kingdom--is the preeminent act of liberation and controversy. Thus, to be sent forth as a disciple-missionary is to be sent as partisans of God's Kingdom into a deeply conflicted circumstance. Given this strife, disciples can expect retaliation by the present evil order.

3. The disciples' mission merges with their following of Jesus. To be with Jesus invariably entails undertaking his mission. We have seen the pattern of summons and sending, where Jesus draws his people to himself in order to send them out. More significantly, the disciples' taking up a cross--the ultimate symbol of conflict with the present age--is both an act of discipleship and the result of missionizing. The disciple cannot be preoccupied in discipleship without being thrust into a special relationship with the world.

It is on this last point that Fackre finds common ground with Mark. Fackre is especially concerned about "inner change of the heart" without "outer reorientation."⁹⁶ While the inner-outer duality is not Mark's concern, he does present discipleship as a call to a task entailing the outside world. It reaches its zenith in Mark in the eighth chapter when Jesus calls upon his followers to take up their own crosses. In other words, the cross is at once the epitome of following and the epitome of service. Both our authors clearly associate service with the Christian life.

⁹⁶Fackre, p. 181.

Fackre and Mark disagree over the commencement of this service. True to form, Fackre's convert is engaged in service, not subsequent to, but as part of the turning process.

...The very act of conversion, of doing an about face, includes a bending down to offer the cup of cold water to those in need.⁹⁷

Mark's disciple is called to a task which will commence in the future. The threshold into discipleship does not entail active social service. The closest we come to such immediate active mission is in the case of Levi and his feast. And, as we've seen, it requires imagination to view the feast as an expression of Levi's service in the world. Further, there is no parallel instant service following the calls of the four fishers or Bartimaeus.

That the disciples are designated for a service which they undertake in the future is made clear in 3.14. Jesus calls and appoints the Twelve "...that they might be sent out..." (literal translation). The verb, apostella, is in the present subjunctive mood indicating purpose rather than immediate discharge of action. The actual missionary undertaking (for which the Twelve have been designated) must wait until 6.7.

The most convincing evidence that the disciples' missionary undertaking is postponed for awhile emerges in Mark's insertion of

⁹⁷Ibid. p. 184.

John the Baptist's execution during the disciples' mission journey. Mark's reader will recall the commencement of Jesus' ministry occurs quite sharply at the point of John's arrest (1.14). In like fashion, Mark launches the disciples' ministry at the point of John's death.

Together with repentance, belief, and "baptism," Fackre also squeezes full-blown Christian service into his conception of the conversion experience. Mark, on the other hand, envisions service arising along the road with Jesus. This is not to say that the service element in Mark's vision is an optional extra which comes along after the important work of repenting and believing are secure. Mark clearly tells the reader that the designation for and anticipation of service is present at the instant of the disciples' call. "Follow me and I will make you fishers of [people]."

Mark and Fackre see service differently in one other way. While both have strong conceptions of the "powers of darkness"⁹⁸ which dominate the prevailing order, Fackre does not identify preaching as a challenge to systemic evil. Neither is preaching a form of service in Fackre's article.

In Mark's gospel, even bearing the name of Christ (13.13) is a provocative gesture. Announcing the presence of the Kingdom and inviting people to repent, is a bold and subversive act which is answered by persecution.

⁹⁸Ibid. p. 184.

Of course, Mark wrote at a time when persecution of Christians was a growing problem. Fackre's world--the United States in the 1970's--was far more genial to Christians. Nevertheless, Mark reminds his readers across the centuries that following Christ and sharing the gospel is to set oneself apart from and against the prevailing order. Mark expresses this apartness in several ways. Disciples sent by Christ have authority over demonic powers. They bear words that endure beyond the passing of the present age (13.31). Even in the present darkness, Jesus disciples don't sleep. They watch for God's coming triumph over the present evil (13.37).

Service--the disciples' stance with respect to the world--is part of the essence of Markan discipleship. Just to be a disciple or to share the gospel with others is to have impact upon the world. For Fackre's convert, concern for others is not so automatic. Fackre needs to argue against an individualistic concept of conversion which entails repentance and faith, but no engagement with others.

Mark enriches our understanding of conversion by reminding us that to take up the life of discipleship is never neutral or inconsequential personal decision. It is a new loyalty which challenges all previous attachments. To follow is to change sides. It is to expose the limits of the power of evil over oneself. This defying of evil intensifies down the road when Jesus invites disciples to preach, heal and banish demons. So, while missionary crusades are not launched in Mark with the taking of discipleship's

first step, the ministry of defection from the present darkness is.

IV. Conclusion

Despite the fact that nearly two thousand years and vast cultural differences separate Mark's gospel and Fackre's lecture, the two writers are in surprising agreement on several aspects of the threshold into the Christian life. Fackre's four turning points all appear--in some form--in the calls of disciples in Mark. Both authors, in their own ways, present conversion as being at once God's work and the believer's work. Both authors display developed concepts of systemic evil which dominates the Christian's world. And both acknowledge the importance of lifelong pilgrimage.

The differences between Mark and Fackre are generally in the degree to which the disciple or convert changes. Mark is always more radical. For instance, both Mark's disciple and Fackre's convert turn away from something--or repent--in order to embrace the new life in Christ. Repentance is abandonment of evil in Fackre. In Mark, repentance starts with abandonment of work and family and culminates with the forsaking of life. In like fashion, Mark's disciple's faith community involvement is more profound than in Fackre's vision. Not only does the Markan disciple join the faith community, he or she forsakes previous social and familial attachments. As for service, Fackre urges it to the point of social action. Mark urges service to the point of taking up a cross.

The turning point which Fackre calls "belief," is the most difficult to compare between the two authors. Fackre's faith, in the main, is assent to the Christian message. Mark's faith is trust in Jesus. This difference arises, in part, because Mark depicts in his gospel the period during Jesus' career where presentation of a developed Christian message would be anachronistic. Consequently, faith is understood differently by each author.

This brings us to the most profound difference between Fackre and Mark, namely Fackre's over-emphasis of the conversion experience. Reading Fackre through the corrective lens of Mark brings this over-emphasis into focus. Despite Fackre's words on the importance of post-conversion pilgrimage, he presents the threshold commitment as substantially completing the transformation that Christian faith demands of each believer. Too much Fackre's conversion is an end in itself. To the degree that Fackre holds conversion as a sufficient goal unto itself, he aligns himself with tendencies in the American evangelical tradition. This movement has traditionally stressed conversion as the essential transforming crisis of the Christian life. Finding Fackre in this position is surprising given his explicit critique of "pietist," "moralism," and "privatism" which we associate with the evangelical movement.

Mark's gospel corrects this over-emphasis. Perhaps one reason Mark scarcely uses conventional terminology for conversion is because he does not see a disciple's first steps in response to Jesus'

call as essentially different from the remainder of the journey. Put differently, there is no point in the disciple's pilgrimage when his or her conversion is complete and a subsequent Christian life commences. The entire course of the journey with Jesus in Mark is a conversion.

Reading Fackre through Mark reveals the extent to which Fackre concentrates personal transformation into the initial moment of faith. Fackre's convert perceives and substantially forsakes--not only personal sin--but complicity with corporate evil. The convert grasps the truth and glory of the gospel in sufficient depth to orient his or her life around it. the convert engages in Christian service immediately and almost automatically.

Unfortunately this over-emphasis of the experience of conversion has been matched in some quarters of the Church by an under-emphasis of the believer's lifelong transformation. In extreme cases, Christians have deemed a conversion experience to be a qualification for jobs in church-related summer camps and schools. Some seminaries ask degree applicants to supply the date of a conversion as a qualification for admission. One recalls the not entirely fictitious scene in Sinclair Lewis' novel, Elmer Gantry, when Elmer is asked to preach the sermon the day after his conversion.⁹⁹ These practices suggest that new-comers to

⁹⁹Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Gantry (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co. Inc., 1927). p. 58.

Christianity enter the faith essentially transformed.

Mark suggests precisely the opposite. The disciples' first steps are simply that--first steps. Against the long evangelical tradition of presenting to potential converts Jesus' atoning death as the first element in Christian faith to believe in, Mark locates the cross at the end of the story. In this position it becomes one of the last things disciples must understand.

The closest Mark comes to being explicit about this understanding of journey comes in the story of Jesus receiving children (10.13-16). Ostensively about Jesus' high regard for little ones, this passage has long been used to defend the practice of infant baptism. The inclusion of verses 14b and 15, however, suggest that Mark is thinking more about discipleship.¹⁰⁰ If only children or the child-like receive the kingdom, then any notion of advancement in discipleship is of dubious value.

...Just as a child trusts an adult and receives from him what he offers, so the disciple is to trust God and receive from him the kingdom. But the kingdom is not a 'thing;' it is God's active rule; the disciple has therefore to allow God to rule in his life. He does not achieve this all at once when he becomes a disciple; it is a gradual process; hence our pericope fits appropriately into a discussion of the nature of discipleship.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰Best, p. 107.

¹⁰¹Ibid. p. 108

Churches which exalt the conversion experience--however dramatic or revolutionary--above the continual conversion of discipleship are out of phase with the witness of Mark.

Christians who emphasize evangelism and the "born again" experience are not the only ones who can learn from Mark. Old Line Protestants who have long de-emphasized conversion have sometimes forsaken the idea that Christian faith deeply changes people. The caricature of liberal Protestants as inattentive to the Scriptures, doctrinally undefined, and indistinguishable from the surrounding culture, is not entirely untrue. While many factors shape the identity and ideology of religious groups, Old Line Protestants often recoil from evangelism and the idea of conversion because of abuses in the revivalistic tradition. Conversionist groups are often dogmatic and manipulative in evangelistic efforts--qualities shunned by liberals.

Unfortunately, when Christians neglect conversion entirely they equally neglect the clear witness of the entire New Testament that Christ changes people. Clearly, any church tradition which ignores conversion entirely, or worse, actively resists the idea has not come to grips with Paul's call for transformation of the mind (Romans 12.1-2), or Christ's summons to repentance (Mark 1.14-15).

One way that the religious left could recover the transforming power of the gospel would be to emphasize Jesus' call to discipleship as the point of departure for the Christian life. This would avoid

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the problems involved when conversion as an experience is exalted. Using Jesus' summons as the model would retain the notion of continual personal movement and change. Other biblical images such as "repentance," "turning," "moving from darkness to light," or being "born again" would be auxiliary.

However churches wrestle with the meaning of conversion, one option is never a faithful possibility--ignoring it altogether. Reading Mark's gospel does make one thing clear. There is no authentic response to Christ that is not in some sense a starting over again--and again. As Jesus says:

...New wine is for fresh skins...(2.22)