

# “Witnesses”

Mark 1.9-13

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

<sup>12</sup> The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. [ESV]

# HOPE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Mr. Bruce R. Johnson

6<sup>th</sup> June, 2010

## I. Introduction

The intent of Mark in writing his gospel was to portray the person and mission of Jesus Christ for Roman Christians undergoing persecution under Nero.<sup>1</sup> If that were *your* purpose, why would you choose to report the baptism (v. 9), blessing (vv. 10-11) and banishment (vv. 12-13) of Jesus? What would you be trying to establish? All reporters are “biased” in the sense that they cannot report absolutely everything. (What was Jesus wearing? What had He had for breakfast that day?) Your “filter” determining choice of material will be influenced largely by your purpose in writing (and by your belief system).

We’ve seen in John’s gospel that his major themes are explicit and expansive. But “Mark writes with a paintbrush. Mark has much more *implicit* major themes, requiring readers to enter into the drama of the Gospel in order to understand its meaning.”<sup>Edw. p. 13</sup>

## II. Entering into the Drama

A. Through Imagination: How do we “enter into the drama of the Gospel”? Some might say “Use your imagination.” Picture a bearded adult, wearing a perhaps only a loincloth and rising up from being completely immersed in a river. Jesus was like us in our corporeality, so He undoubtedly would have wiped the water from His eyes and pushed His hair back.

“Entering in” involves more than imagining. Imagining can be somewhat dangerous in an image-saturated culture. The “immediate” images may be those supplied to us by the most vigorous of God’s enemies. Imagine some of the films you’ve seen. Does the idea of “seeing God,” for example, bring to mind Harrison Ford, Karen Allen and Paul Freeman on top of a mountain set, fan-fed wind swirling, canned lightning flashing and . . . well, you get the (“Raiders of the Lost Ark”) picture. Maturity and caution are required in the use of imagination to enter the drama.

B. By Thinking: Enter in through our minds by drawing inferences -- gaining understanding.<sup>Prov. 4.7</sup> WCF I:6 – “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or *by good and necessary consequence* may be deduced from Scripture.”

Trinity as example of entering in by thinking: It’s early in the story that Mark is telling. We’ll meet the heavenly Father and ~~the~~ Holy Spirit again. [“Holy Spirit” because of original Greek in 1.8. See sermon dated May 16.] For now, we’re seeing the first “hint” (not “proof”) that there may be three related persons who play central roles in this drama of redemption. Son submitted to baptism, Spirit descended and later “drove,” and Father spoke approvingly.

You will need both your imagination and your mind as we unpack this passage. I invite you to enter in as we *investigate* the main character . . .

---

<sup>1</sup> James R. Edwards, The Gospel According to Mark, p. 10 (hereafter “Edw.”)

### III. Jesus the Teacher

A. Person of the Teacher: Edwards again: “Although Jesus is often referred to as a teacher, Mark seldom reports the content of his teaching. It is quickly apparent that the *person* of the teacher is more important than the *content* of his teaching. . . .”<sup>Edw. p. 13</sup>  
[emphasis added] In today’s passage, there is no spoken content at all; we do not hear the voice of Jesus.

But first: “Person more important than content” is a ranking – a way of saying “Don’t get so focused on content that you lose sight of the person.” More deeply: How can this be? Doesn’t content matter a great deal? Doesn’t a teacher teach facts, ideas, propositions, skills, techniques? Yes – and perhaps we should reserve “teaching” in our lexicon for the imparting of just such realities.

Much of Jesus’ *teaching* surely was more like *modeling*. As we’ll see in a few minutes, He *modeled* obedience in keeping His promise to do the Father’s will. As we’ll see later this summer, He *modeled* the primacy of prayer by “rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, . . . depart[ing] and [going] out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.”<sup>1.35</sup>

Personal reference: I didn’t really “link up” Wednesday evening with the specific content of Mr. Malone’s sermon, but learned from him nonetheless. I knew that I was listening to a person who is loved by God, who is able (therefore) to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength and who loves God’s people and enthusiastically seeks God’s best for him. He incarnated Christ for me that night. You might say that I learned that night what a true disciple of Christ can look and sound like. (“Can” because, though redeemed, he’s still a sinner.)

B. Content of the Modeled Teaching. Edwards again: “Above all, Mark’s portrayal of Jesus is characterized by three factors: his divine authority, his mission as the suffering Servant of God, and his divine Sonship.”<sup>Edw. p. 13</sup> Two of those factors are in today’s passage – His divine Sonship and His mission as suffering Servant.

### IV. Christ’s Divine Sonship

It’s easy to see that Christ is the divine Son. The Father says so. The Father is a witness on the Son’s behalf.

A. Father Speaks Love to Son. The Father speaks directly to the Son in 1.11. In 9.7 the Father will speak to the crowd (“This is my beloved Son”). There is a difference between my standing next to Betsy in front of a crowd and saying to the crowd, “This is my beloved wife,” as I point to her, and, in the same setting, turning to her and saying “You are my beloved wife.” Do you see that there is a difference? I am not asking what it is or what it means – just whether there *is* a difference. (Sometimes you can listen to a sermon that way – “grabbing” the basic point even if its refinements escape you.)

Refinements: Which has more impact on you – hearing me declare **to** you that I love Betsy or hearing me declare **to** Betsy that I love her as I did when we were married 44 years ago this Friday? I suspect it’s the latter. When I speak **to** you about my love **for** her, the conversation can be somewhat abstract or “removed,” but when you hear me declare my love **to** her, the lid covering Paul’s “profound mystery”<sup>Eph. 5.32</sup> is being lifted just a little bit for you to peer inside. I am opening up the relationship to you and allowing you not just to listen in but to become a part of it. You become a witness to my declaration and to Betsy’s receiving of it.

B. The Obedient Son. Here . . . look closely . . . Jesus *models* “promise.” (The word itself is nowhere in the passage.) He promised to do His Father’s will<sup>Jn. 6.38</sup> – a promise which we can be confident was witnessed by Holy Spirit. Doing his Father’s will meant being baptized – though He didn’t *need* it for repentance – in order to fulfill all righteousness.<sup>Matt. 3.13-15</sup>

Imagine, in contrast: If, upon being thrown before Pilate, Jesus had said, “Well, yes – I know. There was something said about doing Your will, Father . . . but, I mean, well – don’t You think this has gone a bit too far? Let’s see if we can’t come up with ‘Plan B’ after I get home,” He would have redefined “promise” (without even saying so), making it conditional upon the changing interests of the one making the promise.

So John Mark was telling a part of the gospel story in which Jesus is baptized in order to “teach” or “model” or even “incarnate” *promise*.

C. Love – and Sonship – in Community. But there’s more. There’s the significance of three parties being present in each of the love-declaring situations. In the wedding ceremony, **I** declare my love; **Betsy** receives my declaration and my love; **you** witness the declaration and the receiving. Three parties in Mark 1 – Father declares His love for the Son; Son receives the declaration and the love; Spirit witnesses the declaration and the receiving. (Not to suggest that love within the Godhead moves only in those directions.)

I am going to propose to you that the **doctrine of this passage** – seen more clearly in vv. 9-11 than in vv. 12-13 – is that, at its most intimate, love requires a community. “Love requires community” has at least two dimensions. In the divine dimension, it’s a first principle. Each member of the Triune God loves each other member.<sup>2</sup> You can’t get behind it to analyze it – to say *why* it is so. You can only observe that it *is* so.

In the human dimension, we have already noted that, when you hear me declare my love **to** Betsy, the lid covering Paul’s “profound mystery” is lifted for you to peer inside. I open up the relationship to you and allow you not just to *listen in* but to become a *part* of it. You become a witness to my declaration of love and to Betsy’s receiving of it.

---

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 3.17; 17.15; Jn. 3.35; 14.31; 16.13-14; 17.1-5, 22-26. Some have said that love within the Trinity is the strongest “proof” for the existence of the Trinity. A human (the creature) can’t love unless God (the Creator) can love; otherwise the creature would be greater than the Creator. Since love must have an object and one person cannot be his own object, there must be at least two persons in the Godhead. Once you have admitted two (Father and Son), numerous Bible texts demand that you admit the third (Holy Spirit).

As a witness, you acquire a stake in my keeping my promises to her – in being true to the love I have declared. Because we are fallen people, we need the community to prop us up, and you have an interest in seeing to it that I do not merely do what is right in my own eyes.<sup>Judges 21.25</sup> This is why marriage in the Protestant tradition has always been a community affair . . . because the community is blessed by covenant faithfulness and burdened by covenant unfaithfulness.

## V. Christ’s Mission as the Suffering Servant

As Christ is first blessed (v. 11) and then banished (v. 12), I have two quarrels with the ESV translators. The first is that “. . . with you I am well pleased” might more helpfully have been “. . . in you I am well pleased.” The Greek word apparently can be rendered either way, and I don’t think either is in any sense “technically” wrong. (And, no, I’ve not yet been awarded an advanced degree in Biblical languages!) “With” you – in the idiom of our day (after centuries of Arminianism creeping into the church) – suggests a pleasure with Jesus’ performance, and, indeed, the Father *is properly* pleased with the performance of the Son. But “in” you suggests a completely selfless love, as if the Father had said, “All of my pleasure is in You,” and, as a matter of fact, the King James translators and their descendants on the NASB and NKJV teams render it as “in.”

A. “Therefore, the Spirit drove Him.” There’s no basis in the original text for my quarreling with the translators over their omission of “Therefore” from the beginning of v. 12. My Bible software does not suggest that there’s a phantom word at that point. I simply see a logical connection between verse 11 and verse 12. *Why* did Spirit drive Jesus into the wilderness? Because the Father is well pleased in Him as the One who would bear our griefs and carry our sorrows even while we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. “But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.”<sup>Is. 53.4-5</sup>

B. Angelic Witnesses. Having meditated over Christ’s wilderness temptation, I have begun to think that one reason why the angels rejoice over one sinner who repents<sup>Lk. 15.7</sup> may be that they witnessed and remember the wilderness suffering. Can you hear Michael saying to Gabriel (time for some sanctified imagination), “Ah! See now – there’s another one for whom the Lord Jesus bore all of those temptations in the wilderness . . . another one for whom He became the way of escape.”<sup>1 Cor. 10.13</sup> Hallelujah!”

## VI. Application

Will they rejoice over you? Has Christ borne your griefs and carried your sorrows? Have you entered into that community in which love is enjoyed in its most intimate form, sustained and witnessed by all for whom Christ lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died? Hear God’s call; examine your wants; investigate Christ; receive Him and the community will rejoice in opening its heart to you. Amen.