



RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK'S GOSPEL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SYNODAL CHURCH

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This study examines discipleship in the Gospel of Mark and its relevance for the Synodal Church. It highlights how Mark portrays disciples as both committed followers of Jesus and flawed individuals who struggle to understand Jesus' identity and mission. The study employed narrative criticism as its methodology and a synchronic framework to analyze the stories and language of discipleship and to explore how the ancient text has evolved, with a focus on how modern readers perceive and experience the Markan narrative. This literary analysis emphasized that the Gospel reflects the challenges of Jesus' ministry, including rejection, suffering, and misunderstanding. Nonetheless, his glory manifested through rejection, suffering, passion, death, and resurrection. Mark presents Christological discipleship as a journey marked by faith, self-denial, and perseverance in the face of failures and doubts. Mark's Christology portrays Jesus as the faithful Son of God, obedient to the Father, and a model of radical discipleship through his mission and Messiahship, embodying the ideal of a committed, true disciple. Radical discipleship requires recognizing one's limitations and returning to Jesus after significant failures and mistakes to seek his grace and enlightenment. It is a constant practice to remain in communion with Jesus. Christian discipleship in the Synodal Church is a privileged union with Christ. It requires reliance on Jesus's grace to cultivate constant trust in him as one participates deeply in the Church's universal mission. The study concludes that this model of discipleship offers guidance for the Synodal Church today—believers are called to walk together in faith, actively participate in Christ's mission, and remain steadfast in communion amid failures, limitations, difficulties, and persecution. Synodality requires shared responsibility, dialogue, listening, encouragement, and communal understanding. It mirrors discipleship, a journey of faith, commitment, self-abnegation, renewal, and redemption.

Keywords: Synodal Church, Gospel of Mark, Radical Discipleship, Self-denial, Mission

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New Testament scholars commonly consider the Gospel of Mark the earliest, briefest, and most fundamental Gospel influencing the Synoptic tradition.¹ Traditionally attributed to Mark, a companion of Peter, as noted by Papias of Hierapolis, and believed by some to have been written by Clement of Alexandria, this work is usually dated to 68–70 AD, probably before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, and is believed to have been written in Rome.² The Gospel is marked by brevity, a rapid narrative pace, and a strong thematic focus, especially on discipleship, which Elizabeth Struthers Malbon identifies as its central motif. Key themes include repentance, the Kingdom of God, Jesus' authority, the Messianic secret, and the pattern of suffering, rejection, and death (Mk 1:12 – 15:37).

Discipleship emerges as a defining theological thread, beginning with Jesus' call and continuing throughout the narrative. The first disciples respond immediately, leaving their daily occupations behind (Mk 1:16–20; 2:13–17), demonstrating eagerness but limited understanding of the true cost of following Jesus. Their initial enthusiasm proves insufficient when faced with the demands of self-denial and suffering, symbolized by taking up the cross (Mk 8:34–35). Mark portrays discipleship as radical commitment, requiring sacrifice, austerity, and complete surrender, especially emphasized in Chapters 8–10, alongside passages such as Mk 6:7–13; 8:34–38; and 10:17–31.³

The Twelve are appointed not only to accompany Jesus (Mk 3:14) but also to participate in his

mission, sent out in pairs with strict instructions that highlight detachment from material concerns (Mk 6:7–11). As noted by Francis J. Moloney, this mission underscores reliance on God and communal interdependence. Discipleship in Mark thus involves both “being with” Jesus and being sent out (Mk 8:31; 9:12; 16:15), shaping one's life according to his path of suffering and service.⁴

Mark also presents a nuanced portrayal of the disciples, highlighting their misunderstandings, failures, and struggles (Mk 8:21; 8:32–33; 9:33–34; 10:35–40; 14:10–11, 18–21, 44–46). Their journey reflects a gradual and often incomplete grasp of Jesus' identity, mission, and destiny. This invites readers to reflect on the nature of authentic discipleship, which requires faith, perseverance, and active participation in Jesus' mission. Alongside the Twelve, Mark's Gospel gives significant attention to “minor characters”—individuals from the crowds who encounter Jesus.⁵ Though not formal disciples, their actions often exemplify profound faith.

Among them were the paralytic lowered through the roof in Capernaum (Mk 2:1–12), the Syrophenician woman who begged Jesus for her daughter's affliction (Mk 7:24–29), the blind man Bartimaeus in Jericho (Mk 10:46–52), the poor widow who gave all she had (Mk 12:41–44), the woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany (Mk 14:3–9), and the centurion who confessed Jesus as the Son of God (Mk 15:39). These figures, though briefly present, embody key dimensions of discipleship, including trust,

¹ Theissen, Gerd. “The Synoptic Gospels: Creativity through Genre Variation.” *Studia Aarbusiana Neotestamentica (SANT)* (2026): 347.

² Keown J. M., *Jesus in the World of Colliding Empires: Mark's Jesus from the Perspective of Power and Expectations*, Vol. 1, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon: (2018), 8.

³ Jack Heimbigner, “The Gospel of Mark: Themes, Exploring Faith, Discipleship, and the Messiah's Journey.” Accessed on 3/29/26 from <https://jackheimbigner.medium.com/the-gospel-of-mark-themes-7e3677003460>

⁴ Bernard Orchard, *Dei Verbum and the Synoptic Gospels*, “*This Rock*,” 1996 issue, published by Catholic Answer. Accessed from <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/dei-verbum-and-the-synoptic-gospels-12292>

⁵ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2000), 209. The minor characters were from the crowds or others who encountered Jesus and his disciples. “The minor characters often appear at significant points in the narrative.” Most of their stories influence some narratives in Mark's Gospel.



a model of profound faith, generosity, and recognition of Jesus' identity.

Through narrative criticism, it became clear that Mark's Jesus even praised some minor characters in the context of their encounters with Jesus, and their profound expression of faith in Jesus earned them admiration (Mk 12:41-44; 14:3-9; 7:24-29). They caught glimpses of discipleship by modeling responses that sometimes surpassed those of the Twelve. The language of their stories and how Mark presented them suggest that true discipleship is not defined by status but by faith and action. Together, the portrayals of both the disciples and these peripheral figures illuminate the radical demands of following Jesus—self-renunciation, commitment to mission, and conformity to the way of the cross.

Ultimately, this study situates Mark's theology of discipleship within the life of the Synodal Church, where believers are called to embrace Jesus' mission amid contemporary challenges such as materialism, clericalism, persecution, and failures. The Gospel encourages readers to evaluate their preparedness to follow Jesus completely, recognizing both the sacrifices involved and the transformative journey of discipleship highlighted in Mark's story.

The study's significance lies in its examination of discipleship in Mark's Gospel and its relevance to the Synodal Church. Drawing on Mark's account, contextualizing participation through simplicity speaks to the disciples' challenge of embodying⁶ Jesus' life and the attainment of spiritual maturity. Understanding Mark's portrayal of discipleship can profoundly deepen theological and scriptural insight and offer meaningful guidance to researchers, students, and contemporary members of the Synodal

Church as they strive to walk together and participate in the Church's universal mission in communion with Christ.

This research explores discipleship in the Gospel of Mark, focusing on how Jesus calls individuals to follow Him, stay with Him, and participate in His mission (Mk 3:14-15; 6:7-13). Mark presents discipleship as a radical way of life that requires self-denial and taking up the cross (Mk 8:34-38), thereby distinguishing true followers from casual observers. The study examines the disciples' conditions and experiences, highlighting the challenges and demands of following Jesus and their relevance for the Synodal Church.

By drawing parallels between Jesus' call to His first disciples and the Synodal Church's communal journey, the research examines how the Church listens to Jesus, remains in communion with Him, and witnesses to His mission. It further addresses four guiding questions: the meaning of discipleship in Mark for the Synodal Church; the nature of radical discipleship in Mark's narrative; its demands and challenges; and its implications for contemporary Church life. In this context, the researchers hope to address the following research questions, which they will discuss as the study develops:

1. What does discipleship in Mark mean for the Synodal Church?
2. What is radical discipleship in Mark's narrative?
3. What are the demands and challenges of radical discipleship in Mark?
4. What are the implications of radical discipleship for the Synodal Church?

⁶ Moloney, J. Francis, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 2002), 119. Mark 6:6a-13



The methodology employed for this study is narrative criticism. To interpret the Markan narrative, the researchers applied the historical method to analyze the story and its language of discipleship and to explore how the ancient text has evolved. Using a synchronic approach, the narrative text was discussed in its literal style, focusing on how modern scholars and readers perceive the Markan narrative as experienced, and analyzing its development, characters, and significant themes. Narrative criticism also provides an exegetical framework and theological reflection on the narrative text of Mark. The methodology offers a model and an exemplar of discipleship. It presents a Christological understanding of discipleship as a formative process that continues through Jesus' ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem and his disciples' behavior in the passion narrative in Jerusalem. This work is an attempt to improve understanding of Mark's intentions, how his narrative makes sense to the implied reader,⁷ the Synodal Church's understanding of walking together as its members, and how the characters' appearances in the narrative contribute to the development of the Markan narrative.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Traditionally, Mark's Gospel is the shortest and the first to be written. As the first Gospel, Mark receives more attention as an essential source for Matthew and Luke, who drew on it as a guide and tailored their works to suit their audiences.⁸ The narrative approach to the text can shape the reader's investigation and study of it, as well as the specific historical tradition that gave rise to it. It helps identify with the implied readers,

including the members of the Church, as they achieve a more profound understanding of the text through exegesis, dialogue, and discussion.

The critical reading of Mark's narrative focuses on the historical and socio-cultural contexts surrounding the text and on its development over time. Diachronic aspects of the narrative text enhance the reader's understanding of the text's tradition, form, composition, redaction, and historical criticism. By contrast, the text's synchronic consideration helps the reader focus on the literary and rhetorical structure, criticism, and their function and effect on the reader of the narrative text.

Some scholars date the writing of Mark's Gospel to between 68 and 73 AD. Returning to the early second-century bishop Papias, the traditional attribution holds that Mark was the author. He was a follower and 'interpreter' of Peter, commonly known as John Mark from Acts, whose mother owned a house in Jerusalem. The author of the Gospel in question (the second Gospel of the NT) could also be another Christian follower of the Apostles named Mark.

The author was probably not an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry but narrated from the account of an eyewitness preacher (St. Peter). Some of the author's statements about Palestinian geography are considered inaccurate.⁹ The author might draw on existing apostolic teaching. He began with the title "The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" in the early part of his writing (Mk 1:1). If Mark was the interpreter of Peter, the leader of the apostles, as Papias affirmed (1 Pet 5:13), then the oral teachings from which he wrote his narrative text could be considered the ideal teachings of Jesus.

⁷ Henderson, Suzanne Watts. *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511487989>.

⁸ Brown, E. Raymond, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, First Yale University Press Impression (210).

⁹ Wardle, Timothy. "Mark, the Jerusalem Temple and Jewish Sectarianism: Why Geographical Proximity Matters in Determining the Provenance of Mark." *New Testament Studies* 62, no. 1 (2016): 60–78. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688515000375>.



For this reason, the Gospel of Mark is arguably the reorganization of a standard type of Peter's discourses to his audience. It is difficult to determine precisely which community Mark addressed with his excellent news. However, the Gospel provides clear evidence that Gentiles who lack certain essential Jewish customs (Mk 7:3-5) need instruction. The author's tone stresses the community that had suffered persecution and failure and needed encouragement. A few Latin lines in Mark's Ancient Greek narrative led some modern New Testament scholars to propose that Mark's audience was the Christians in Rome who suffered persecution under Emperor Nero between AD 64 and 68.

Mark was likely striving to build enduring, vibrant Christian communities to safeguard the apostolic zeal for the propagation of the Gospel in both Israel and Gentile regions. The sayings of Jesus would not be regarded merely as the teaching of a wise teacher, preacher, or even a philosopher, as in the Hellenistic world, where St. Paul encountered some philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:17; 21). The evangelist avoided that problem by weaving together sayings and deeds about Jesus from various traditions and from the experiences of his public ministry.

RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK

Mark retells the story of Jesus from oral tradition and presents his readers with both his past and current Gospel accounts, highlighting the preparation for Jesus' public ministry, suffering, and death. The Gospel of Mark is the remarkable news of Jesus, the Son of God. Mark assigns Jesus the title "the Son of God" in his prologue (Mk 1:1). Only through him is the "*euangelion*" (εὐαγγέλιον) of human salvation proclaimed (Mk 1:1; 1:14). After his baptism in the Jordan River (Mk 1:9-11) and his temptation in the

desert (Mk 1:12-13), Mark's focus shifts to Galilee.

Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, proclaiming a message of repentance and calling some men to follow him. Those who accepted the message of repentance and were prepared to receive God's Kingdom were Simon, Andrew, James, John, and Levi (Mk 1:16-20; 2:13-14). They were the first to respond to Jesus' invitation to follow him. Unlike the Jewish Rabbis or the Scribes, Jesus initiated the call; he did not wait for others to ask to follow him. His invitation required an immediate response, and the five men who answered did so without delay. Notably, James and John responded similarly to Simon and Andrew when Jesus invited them to follow.

Likewise, Levi, the tax collector, responded in the same manner. All five men responded enthusiastically to Jesus' call. They were ready to embrace the challenges and radical demands of Jesus' invitation. Mark portrayed them as abandoning their daily work and family. Simply put, they left everything to follow Jesus from the moment they were called (Mk 3:14-15). "Follow me" or "Come after me" (cf. Mk 1:16, 20; 2:14) are phrases associated with the radical discipleship of Jesus. An invitation to experience the Messiahship begins with suffering, self-denial, and living out the implications of the cross (Mk 8:34 ff.). Mark's narrative criticism in this section is in the language of the cross, in the "Greek term, ἡ ὁδός, *hodos*, *the Way*,"¹⁰ as exemplified by the minor character Bartimaeus, who dares to follow Jesus on the way to his mission and destiny in the following pages (cf. Mk 10:46-52).

Radical discipleship in Mark's Gospel is understood as a passion for embracing Jesus'

¹⁰ Jung, Deok Hee. "Markan Spirituality of the Way" *Religions*, 2024,15, no. 10: 1210. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101210>



life and mission. This new mission, which they never comprehended (Mk 1:17), still led them to immerse themselves in it deeply. They accepted the role of fishers of men and willingly embraced the challenges of being sent out. Mark highlighted the disciples' successful mission. They remained immersed in the mission even after returning from the villages where they had been sent to cure the sick and cast out demons (Mk 6:30-33). They had little or no time to rest (Mk 6:31). Mark's portrayal of the disciples from the time they were called until the successful completion of their missionary work indicates significant improvements in their lives with Jesus.

Until now, the identity of Mark's Jesus remained hidden (Messianic secret). He has prevented others from speaking about his identity or from sharing his power and authority to perform miracles and cure diseases in the early part of the narrative (Mk 1:24-25; 3:11).

One positive portrayal of the disciples as they follow Jesus is Peter's faith in recognizing Jesus' true identity and his confession that Jesus is the Messiah (Mk 8:29). However, they were instructed to keep this secret (8:30). The women disciples mentioned by Mark in the passion and death narrative are shown as dedicated and committed followers who not only followed Jesus but also shared their resources and provided services to him. In Mark's Gospel, discipleship is not just a requirement for the chosen followers but also a way of life for those who encounter Jesus. Mark's language highlights the faithfulness of other followers in the narrative. Their reactions and expressions of faith help deepen readers' understanding of Mark's concept of discipleship.

THE CHALLENGES AND DEMANDS OF RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP

The disciples' unwavering faith demonstrated their deepest trust in Jesus when he called them to discipleship. Their sincerity as disciples was evident in the first part of the Gospel. They experienced his gospel and were empowered to go out and preach (Mk 1:16-20 & 2:14-17; 3:14-15). However, as the narrative progressed, the disciples began to show signs of misunderstanding and failure. On several occasions, they were confused and strayed from Jesus' main teachings. They overlooked the essentials for their journey (Mk 1:17-23; 8:16-17; 8:14-21). They faced challenging demands, which led to misunderstandings about Jesus' identity and mission (Mk 8:17-21; 6:50-52).

Mark's portrayal of the demands of radical discipleship highlights the distinct character of Jesus' early disciples. Mark was straightforward in describing Jesus' early ministry in Galilee. Jesus called and invited busy men preparing their fishing gear. The narrative emphasized their receptiveness, teachability, and alacrity for the mission. Their efforts and commitments were acknowledged following the successful completion of their mission (Mk 6:30-33).

Over time, the disciples began to show lapses in understanding Jesus' words and deeds. The same disciples, who had the power and authority to heal the sick and cast out demons, struggled with faith as they tried to make sense of their lives with Jesus. They faced pressure and challenges stemming from a lack of faith in Jesus and in themselves. As inner-circle followers of Jesus, they had the power to know the secret news of the Kingdom of God. Yet they were mystified by the parables and repeated the same mistake, even after they had been offered further instructions privately (Mk 4:1-9; 4:13). Mark was not



dismayed at comparing them to the faithless generation (Mk 9:19).

Mark straightforwardly recounted the failures, weaknesses, and incomprehension demonstrated by the disciples, as well as the embarrassing questions they asked Jesus (Mk 4:35-38; 5:31).¹¹ They were terrified and expressed their doubts, uncertainties, and lack of faith in Jesus.

For Mark, the chosen disciples' participation in the demands of discipleship was inadequate and discouraging, given the magnitude of their failures and ignorance. On many occasions, Mark portrayed them as failures and as lacking comprehension. Mark narrated some of these incidents in two accounts of the multiplication of loaves and fish. Jesus knew the power and authority he gave the disciples to teach, heal, and expel demons (Mk 3:13-19; 6:7-13). With that authority and power, Jesus challenged the disciples to feed the crowd themselves after they asked hopeless and embarrassing questions (Mk 6:35-37). Because of their lack of faith, they began to show failure and doubt. They gave embarrassing answers to Jesus (Mk 8:4).

The evangelist provides his readers with both a social and a narrative setting. Mark recounts another embarrassing moment among the disciples, depicting their ignorance and fear as they journeyed with Jesus in a boat. They witnessed the feeding of the four thousand and the five thousand men, yet still struggled to understand whether they had enough bread for their journey (Mk 8:14-21). They were completely unaware of what was happening and what it meant to be with Jesus, who could do all things.

They found themselves spiritually blind, failing to cry out for a more profound meaning in their lives with Jesus during this time. Mark's narrative analysis places these former fishermen alongside their contemporaries, such as Bartimaeus, an important minor character. The blind beggar saw Jesus as the Son of David, who appeared to him as his savior. He would not let him pass without recognizing his presence, seeking his mercy, and following Jesus on the way to the cross (Mk 10:46-49). He was driven not only by a desire to see but also by a desire to experience discipleship, in contrast to the selected followers, who, out of spiritual blindness, failed to recognize their communion with Jesus in his mission through faith.

A synchronic analysis of this section emerges from the juxtaposition of contrasting narratives that Mark presents to his readers. The narrative framework suggests that those who stay and walk with Jesus may repeatedly experience spiritual blindness to Jesus' power to heal and strengthen their lives in him. In contrast, those who were physically blind became spiritually enlightened to recognize divine power and healing in Jesus from afar.

Perhaps the highest point at which many readers of Mark may conclude that the disciples' discipleship is inadequate centers on the three predictions of the passion, death, and resurrection appearances.

In each prediction, the disciples are shown to be confused and to focus on their agenda rather than on the imminent death awaiting Jesus (Mk 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). Peter, who attempted to rebuke Jesus for predicting his fate in Jerusalem, showed no concern for his agony. The other disciples did not understand because they were focused on their selfish motives, asking who was the greatest among them rather than

¹¹ Aprilia Jenny & Lasti Lasti, "The Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Mark". 2026. *J-KIM: Jurnal Kreativitas Ilmiah Mahasiswa* 2 (1): 01-08. <https://journal.irsyad.org/index.php/J-KIM/article/view/93>.



who was ready to suffer their master's passion and death. James and John responded to Jesus' third passion prediction by making ambitious wishes, indicating their total ignorance about the destiny of the (Jesus) Messiah in Jerusalem, about which Jesus speaks. On the contrary, those who encountered Jesus at some point in Mark's narrative were commended and presented as faithful followers.

Mark's narrative interpretation and analysis of the three passion predictions situate the narrative from Jesus's Galilean ministry to his journey to Jerusalem. Mark intended his implied readers to understand the narrative in their own context. The high point of the narrative shift to the journey sets the tone for discipleship. Mark's Jesus described to his disciples the journey through self-denial and rejection by the Jewish leadership, which launches Jesus' ordeal and eventually leads to his death (Mk 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). This way to Jerusalem leads to the cross, signifying suffering and death. While the disciples were successful in preaching and casting out demons (Mk 6:7; 13), Jesus's discourses about his suffering and death in chapters 8, 9, and 10 on the way to Jerusalem shut their spiritual ears to human suffering.¹²

Their spiritual blindness prevented them from seeing the reality of the cross and the suffering associated with discipleship. Mark characterized this attitude as a total failure and misunderstanding. The disciples' attitudes were set alongside Jesus' predictions. Theological and exegetical analysis of discipleship at that point in the narrative indicates that societal power, superiority, and human ambitions and motivations stand in opposition to God's

demands for his Kingdom and the gospel of self-denial and the way of the cross presented by Jesus. Mark's narrative critique and insights provide evidence that only Jesus would faithfully embrace and accomplish the human suffering associated with mission and identity.

Narrative critiques highlighted the positive aspects of minor characters who appeared in the narrative and then disappeared after their encounter with Jesus.¹³ Among them were Blind Bartimaeus, whose narrative has already been discussed supra; the Syrophoenician woman, the woman who anointed Jesus's feet; the woman who suffered from hemorrhages; Jairus; the Father whose son was afflicted with convulsions and epileptic seizures; and other individuals who demonstrated profound faith and humility before Jesus.¹⁴

After receiving healing and spiritual nourishment, others probably felt qualified to follow Jesus on the way (Mk 10:46-49). The rich man who approached Jesus is a typical example of someone invited to follow but rejected the invitation. He came to Jesus as one who had obeyed the law from the beginning of his life. However, when asked whether he lacked one thing, he repudiated the invitation and could hardly bear the cost of discipleship. On the other hand, the chosen disciples followed Jesus' instructions from the time they were called, but they lacked understanding and failed halfway through Mark's narrative.

Although Mark's portrayal of the disciples highlights their negative attitudes, they never stopped following Jesus. They misunderstood

¹² Miller, Geoffrey "David. An Intercalation Revisited: Christology, Discipleship, and Dramatic Irony in Mark 6.6b-30," 2012. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 35(2), 176-195. "Mark 6.6b-30 summarizes Christ's identity at the point in the Gospel and prefigures his ultimate fate while simultaneously portraying the disciples in favorable terms in order to accentuate their fall in subsequent episodes."

¹³ Huebenthal, Sandra. "Additional Notes to an Unfinished Symphony: Resurrection and Afterlife According to Mark." In *Social Memory Theory and Conceptions of Afterlife in Jewish and Christian Antiquity*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | Schöningh, 2022) doi: https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657796212_010

¹⁴ Di Pasquale, Luca. "The Faith That Saves: A Narrative Journey from Blindness to Discipleship (Mark 10:46-52)." *Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny*, 2025. doi:10.21906/RBL.3755.Vancouver



the way of Jesus and repeatedly failed to grasp his teachings and instructions of discipleship.¹⁵ By the time the Gospel of Mark was composed, the Apostles had faced radical challenges as missionary disciples. They embraced genuine life as apostles and suffered the cross of persecution for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. The disciples are central figures in Mark's Gospel. Their life as disciples, as Mark depicts it, is one that the Synodal Church can recognize and imitate.

Mark's depiction of discipleship offers a way for members of the Synodal Church to walk in communion with Jesus and commit themselves to the challenges of her missionary discipleship. Suffering and persecution may come, but they are necessary for Christian discipleship. In the face of the Synodal missionaries' weaknesses and failures, Jesus encourages members to remain in communion with the Church and to participate in unity and diversity. Synodality demands abandoning all things to follow Christ. All the baptized members of the Church are invited to walk with the suffering Jesus amid abuses, scandals, and clericalism in their missionary discipleship.

DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK'S NARRATIVE

Considering the interaction between Mark's characterization and his comparisons and contrasts among the characters helps readers determine what it means to be a disciple. Alternatively, what is discipleship all about in the Gospel of Mark? Or, "Who are the best role models for discipleship in Mark? Interestingly, Mark presents a paradoxical portrayal of discipleship, particularly for the appointed disciples.

On the one hand, Jesus called them and appointed twelve followers to stay with him and participate in his mission (Mk 3:13-15). Immediately, those men left their work, family, and everything to follow Jesus (Mk 1:16-20; 2:14). They enthusiastically embraced their commission in Jesus' mission. They carried out a fruitful mission, exercising the authority given to them to cast out demons, anoint the sick, and cure the afflicted (Mk 6:7-13, 30). Peter's declaration was an attempt to reveal Jesus' true identity, but he was quickly cautioned to maintain the Messianic secret until sometime after Jesus' resurrection (Mk 8:29).

On the other hand, the chosen disciples hardly met the demands of discipleship and frequently failed throughout the narrative to comprehend Jesus' words and deeds (for example, Mk 4:13, 40:6:50-52, 7:18, 8:14-21, 10:13-14, 35-45). Although Jesus privately instructed them when they returned to him, they were still ignorant of his teachings, identity, and mission (e.g., Mk 4:10-13, 33-34; 7:17-18; 9:28-29; 10:11-12; 13:3-37). The feeding narratives of the five thousand and the four thousand (Mk 6:34-44; 8:1-10) connect to Jesus' subsequent travels with the Twelve disciples by boat. There was a significant failure among the disciples to recall the miracles and wonders Jesus had performed in his previous ministry.

Analytically, Mark portrays the disciples' actions as a lack of faith and understanding of Jesus. In the narrative, faith and understanding are essential requirements of a genuine disciple (Mk 8:17-18; 8:20-21). Chapters 8 to 10 contain significant narratives dedicated to Jesus' teaching on discipleship. The passion predictions give readers a clue to the narrative and to the disciples' unreadiness to embrace and emulate the difficult words about Jesus' fate and what awaits him on his journey to Jerusalem (Mk 8:31;

¹⁵ Kartika, Emilia, Hiu Willison, David Sulardi Sastro, and Yosef Antonius. 2026. "Jesus' Discipleship and the Failure of the Disciples in the Gospel of Mark According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer". *Asian Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 5 (1):1-12. <https://doi.org/10.55927/ajpr.v5i1.16390>.



9:30-32; 10:33-34). The third passion prediction clearly spells out the meaning and demands of discipleship. It calls for accepting the suffering of self-denial, embracing what the cross entails daily, and following Jesus in his suffering and death.

Failing to understand and accept this hard teaching of Jesus means one cannot be a genuine disciple. Throughout the narrative, particularly in his predictions about his passion, the disciples responded negatively, showing no interest in Jesus' teachings about his destiny and mission. In the first prediction of Jesus' passion, Peter tried to prevent Jesus' way to the cross by rebuking him (Mk 6:31-32; 8:34-38). In the second passion prediction, the disciples did not understand his imminent passion and death in Jerusalem. They were overwhelmed by fear and reluctant to ask him. They were preoccupied with their human authority and superiority (Mk 9:30-32, 33-37). In the third passion prediction, while Jesus was sharing his impending agony in Jerusalem, the sons of Zebedee (James and John) were busy discussing their ambitious agenda to secure his favor and superiority (Mk 10:33-34, 35-45). The behavior of the Twelve disciples was portrayed in the narrative as marked by ignorance of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' passion and death. This indicates their unpreparedness to embrace self-denial and the pain of bearing their daily cross.

In these passion predictions, the appointed disciples respond negatively, an implicit failure, because discipleship in these passages (Mk 8:31; 9:30-32; 10:33-34) is defined as suffering. The Twelve have shown themselves unable to recognize suffering as God's way for the Messiah to accomplish his Father's will on the cross. Mark affirms that discipleship is not only about following Jesus (Mk 1:16-20; 2:14) or recognizing Jesus as God's suffering Messiah

(Mk 8:31), but also about being willing to carry one's cross and suffer with Jesus (Mk 8:34-38).

The analysis of the narrative also revealed some women disciples who followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. Mark was silent about them except for Jesus' encounter with the woman who came to anoint him in Bethany (Mk 14:3-9). Nevertheless, Mark acknowledged traces of exceptional sacrifices and commitment that the silent women rendered to Jesus, probably dating back to when they encountered Jesus and his disciples (Mk 15:40-41, 47; 16:1-8; 61:9-11). Eventually, the chosen disciples who were called to follow Jesus and stay with him deserted him (Mk 14:50; 14:72; 16:8). The genuine disciples followed their master and fulfilled the purpose to which they were called. Unfortunately, the chosen disciples not only failed to embrace Jesus' teaching on his suffering and death, but they also fled in fear from him when he was captured, leaving him alone to die on the cross (Mk 14:50-52).

In contrast to the attitude of other disciples, the women disciples did not flee from Jesus. Rather, they remained with him and witnessed his death. They watched from a distance. They had come up from Galilee to Jerusalem with Jesus and accompanied him to his death (Mk 15:40-41, 47; 16:1-8; 61:9-11). Mark used the Greek word *θεωρέω*, meaning "to observe" (15:40; 15:47), to describe the women disciples who were not merely passersby at the crucifixion site. They were "looking on from a distance" and "watching where Jesus was laid." This indicates their fidelity and commitment to die with Jesus.

Mark's portrayal of the Twelve disciples in the narrative offers readers both encouragement and warning (Mk 6:50; 10:49; 6:5-12) about the necessity of committed discipleship and readiness to suffer with Jesus to fulfill his Father's will.



Taking both the major and minor characters into account, as depicted by Mark in the narrative, the minor characters were exemplars of genuine discipleship. Their expression of faithfulness and readiness, which drew them to Jesus, was far more encouraging and enriching than that of those whom Jesus called and chose to follow him.

The readers of Mark and members of the Synodal Church, like the Twelve disciples, are left with an important question of radical discipleship: whether they can live up to the demands of genuine discipleship by doing the will of God as Jesus did (Mk 3:35; 14:36). The following chapter presents the implications of radical discipleship for the members of the Church. The members of the Church are called and chosen to follow Christ in communion and to participate in his mission.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP FOR THE SYNODAL CHURCH

It would be appropriate to briefly explore and conceptualize the terms “Synod” and “Synodality,” along with the Church’s understanding of them, as they are essential to this section’s discussion. In the Gospel of Mark, there are traces of synodality. Although they may not appear as the Church understands them, their meaning and how Jesus introduced and implemented them are precisely what the Synodal Church encourages its members to live out. The synodal way in Mark’s Gospel is evident in Jesus’ words. He called men to be with him and journey together (Cf. Mk 3:14). Jesus created an “assembly, communion” of disciples and named them the Twelve Apostles.

They would learn from him by adhering to his words and deeds. He would commission them for his mission and exercise the authority Jesus

had given them over the afflicted and sick. They would cast out demons and herald the Gospel of the Messiah of God (Cf. Mk 3:14; 1:16-25; 2:13-17 & 6:7-13). The communion of disciples, in their participation in Jesus, would embrace their mission “ad gentes” (Mk 16:15). Christ is the head of the Synodal Church he established. He identified himself as the way to the Father, the truth of God’s revelation. He is the very life of every person who believes in him (Cf. Jn 14:6). The Christian community of disciples was initially identified as “the way” after the death and resurrection of Jesus (Cf. Acts 9:2; 19, 9.23; 22, 4; 24, 14.22).

It was called “the way” to witness to and participate in communion with Christ and to propagate his Messianic mission amid persecution and trials. The Synodal Church is likewise called to walk together in the way of Christ, inspired by the Spirit of Truth. The Church is a communion of the people of God, gathered to walk the synodal path. Synodality invites members to bear witness to the Gospel truths. This process prepares members of the Church for dialogue, discussion, and discernment of missionary discipleship through listening and mutual understanding inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Synodal dialogue is an inclusive process that enables members of the Church to collectively analyze discipleship in the Church’s pastoral and missionary conversion.¹⁶ This process involves participating in the life of Jesus and exploring its implications for members of the Synodal Church.

The root of “synod” is the Greek word *synodos*, which means “an assembly” in English. It is translated into Latin as Concilium. In other words, a synod is an assembly or gathering of the

¹⁶ Illathuparampil, M., Making Disciples by Walking Together: Seminary Formation Toward a Synodal Church. *Asia n Horizon* 2023, Vol. 17, No. 1, Pages: 119-127 Accessed on 31/8/2026 from <https://dvkjournals.in/index.php/ah/article/view/4889/3892>



bishops, with some representatives, denominated ecumenical, under the presidency of the Holy Pontiff. They gather to discuss and decide matters concerning faith and morals, Christian discipleship, and current issues facing the Church. Blessed Pope Paul VI instituted the Synod of Bishops, and the Church commemorated its 50th anniversary in 2018 as preparation for the general assembly of bishops. In the synodal Church, members learn to understand their joint mission. God calls each member of the Church to learn from discussions and decisions, listen to one another, and participate in the mystery of God. Their purpose is to discern, by the inspiration of the Spirit, appropriate ways of responding to the signs of the time. They discern the Church's needs and the mission's goal today.

For these reasons, synodality is the process that encourages members of the whole Church to gather, walk forward, and be inspired by the Spirit through the Scriptures. This is done through dialogue and listening, and through communion by participating in the Church's mission in the world.¹⁷ Since 2021, Pope Francis has been inviting members of the Church into the depths of synodality. This invitation allows members of the Church to reflect more on unity, involvement, and their commission as disciples of Christ.

It calls for the members' consciousness, urging them to resolve to heed the Holy Spirit's invitation and enter into Jesus' mission. Jesus called and appointed those he wanted to follow him (Mk 1:17 & 2:14). He likewise called each member of the synodal Church to come after him in communion and walk together with him (cf. Mk 1:17; 3:14-15; 6:7-13). The early Church never

ceased to gather as an assembly in communion with Christ. They devoted themselves to meeting and walking together by faith; they grew as the Lord added to their number (Cf. Acts 2:44-47). Although they suffered severe persecution, their zeal for Christian discipleship sustained them in their participation in and in witnessing the universal mission of the Church in union with Christ.

The study of radical discipleship in Mark's Gospel, as presented on the previous pages, offers a clearer view of the disciples' qualities and their significant impact on the Synodal Church. Evangelist Mark never mentions synod or synodality when describing the disciples' lives. However, there are hints of synodality in Mark's Gospel, as it involves communion, participation, and missionary discipleship. The early part of Mark's story offers readers a radical invitation that requires immediate, thoughtful responses. It invites the disciples to come together in communion with Jesus and ultimately to be called to a mission that is linked to him. Likewise, the Church calls her baptized members to walk together in communion with Jesus and to participate in His mission. Formatively, Jesus wanted His followers to gather with Him, listen to His words, and imitate Him as He proclaims His Gospel to the world (Mk 3:14-15).

The Gospel message was the foundation of the early Church's life and remains so for the Synodal Church today. The Gospel calls for radical discipleship. The Gospel of Mark develops the theme of discipleship, and since it is the source of the other Synoptic Gospels, Christian discipleship is rooted in Mark's narrative. Reading the entire narrative of Mark, we see that the message Mark conveys about discipleship is a radical change in life and mission, a new way of life and mission with Jesus (Mk 1:16-20; 2:13-14). Those fishermen were called for a radical

¹⁷ Igbokwe, Innocent, "A Synodal Church: The Church in a Journey or a Journey in the Church?" *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life*, 2023. Vol. 20, No. 1, 2023, Accessed on 31/8/2026 from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368713371_A_Synodal_Church_The_Church_in_a_Journey_or_a_Journey_in_the_Church



transformation of life and mission to become fishers of men—missionary disciples of Jesus in the world.

The radical invitation emphasizes a call to communion and active participation in Jesus' mission. The disciples immediately responded to what seemed like a summons in their lives—a call to follow Jesus and walk in His ways. Mark explicitly states that, for a time, the disciples struggled and needed adjustments, understanding, and reevaluation of their failures and difficulties. Meeting the demands of radical discipleship, as Mark describes them, leads to significant misunderstandings and repeated failures throughout the story. Despite the challenges of discipleship, the disciples never stopped approaching Jesus for further instruction and more profound understanding.

They asked questions when they felt confused or ignorant. They sought Jesus' help and intervention when frightened, and they rebuked him for predicting his imminent death because of their inadequacy and unwillingness to suffer as the Messiah. These glimpses into the struggles of Mark's disciples offer important lessons in Christian discipleship within the Synodal Church. The disciples' call to radical discipleship and Mark's portrayal of their responses are relevant to the Synodal Church's missionary discipleship. Missionary discipleship is Jesus' call to all baptized members of the Synodal Church, without exception. The Synodal Church encourages its diverse members to come together to discuss their call to communion, their genuine commitment to the Church's faith and life, and their missionary dedication. Synodality is a time to define and express the Church's identity, her mission in the world, and her role as a people of God, called together in their diversity. It is a time for deep dialogue, listening, and prayerful discernment of ways to respond to her mission

by practicing synodality and bearing witness to the joy of the Gospel.

Aware of human strengths and weaknesses, the Synodal Church seeks the Spirit's guidance to foster the spiritual and psychological well-being of its members. Synodality involves the conversion of hearts among church members and a need for spiritual and psychological renewal among its ministers and laity. It is part of the Christian effort to address the challenges posed by abuse and scandals, which have resulted in a negative image of the Church. Another key aspect is that the Synodal Church implements concrete measures and policies to protect vulnerable adults and minors and provides effective interventions for victims of abuse.

The members of the Church face human weaknesses, as the disciples did in Mark's Gospel, marked by failures and limited understanding. Despite these struggles, they are nourished by Christ through the Holy Spirit in the sacraments. The sacraments the Church administers and celebrates, along with the communion shared among members, draw them closer to Christ. Christ sanctifies and purifies the Church's weaknesses and struggles through these sacraments, offering hope even in times of persecution. In communion with Christ and under the leadership of his vicar (Pope Francis), along with the college of bishops, priests, and the laity, the people of God are called to participate fully in the Church's mission.¹⁸

The Church's evangelization has both internal (*ad intra*) and external (*ad extra*) dimensions, in which believers seek conversion of heart. Active participation in the liturgy, especially the Eucharistic celebration, initiates the Church's

¹⁸ Palakeel, Joseph Scaria. "Journeying Together to Evangelize. A Look at the Synodal Church of Pope Francis." *Asian Horizons*, Vol. 14, No. 1. Pages: 119–136, 2020: 119–36. doi:10.5281/ZENODO.8145394.



shared mission. In every Eucharistic celebration, members of the Synodal Church are sent on a mission. The Eucharist concludes with a mission: “Ite, missa est.” Jesus also sends each member of the Synodal Church, as he sent the disciples in Mark’s Gospel, to proclaim his Gospel.

It is an invitation to live a life of witness both within and outside the Church. The Holy Spirit inspires a life dedicated to bearing witness to Christ’s mission. Synodality is the way the Church evangelizes the world and overcomes human weaknesses and sins. Bearing witness to the Gospel involves the unavoidable suffering of carrying the cross of rejection, as Jesus did. Like the disciples of Mark, the Church often fails to meet the demands of her missionary discipleship. Nonetheless, Christ keeps motivating the Church across all ages through the Holy Spirit. He calls and encourages the Church community through synodality, walking together in renewed faith and fully participating in witnessing His Gospel in the world. The radical discipleship of Mark can serve as a model for Christian discipleship in practicing synodality, both locally and universally.

Mark’s Gospel highlights Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection, depicting a swift ministry that pauses to emphasize His suffering. Rejection is a key theme: Jesus faces rejection from His hometown, is betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, abandoned by His disciples, and handed over to Pontius Pilate, ultimately dying alone on the cross.

Discipleship in Mark is linked to self-denial, bearing the cross, and participating in Christ’s mission. The disciples’ journey reflects human weakness, misunderstanding, fear, and failure, as well as moments of faith and commitment. While unclean spirits recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the disciples often fail to understand

Him, illustrating Mark’s Messianic secret—Jesus as a suffering Messiah rather than the expected political liberator. Mark’s Christology presents Jesus as the faithful Son of God, obedient to the Father, and a model of radical discipleship through sacrifice, self-denial, and mission. Discipleship requires recognizing one’s limitations and returning to Jesus, even amid failure.

Applying Mark’s Gospel to the Synodal Church, members face challenges such as misunderstandings, human weakness, abuse, and persecution, yet they are called to walk together in faith. Synodality mirrors the disciples’ journey: a path of listening, dialogue, communal discernment, and renewal. Jesus’ resurrection empowers the Church to overcome sin, injustice, and internal crises, embodying God’s Kingdom in acts of love, mercy, and compassion.

Ultimately, Mark emphasizes that Christian discipleship—for both the disciples and the Synodal Church—is about courage, faithful witness, and participation in Christ’s mission, even amid suffering and failure. The way of the cross prepares the Church to encounter the risen Lord and to continue His mission in the world.

The Synod on Synodality draws deeply from the Gospels, particularly Mark, whose portrayal of discipleship offers a model for the Church. Mark presents disciples who are both faithful and fragile—some enthusiastically embrace the Gospel yet struggle with doubt when challenges arise. This mirrors the reality of the Synodal Church, which includes both saints and sinners, as well as the strong and the weak. Synodality calls members to share responsibility, encourage one another, and be strengthened by the Holy Spirit, fostering perseverance amid trials.



Mark emphasizes that Jesus' glory is revealed through suffering, death, and resurrection, and that discipleship requires obedience, faith, commitment, understanding, and sacrifice. Despite facing a hostile world, persecution, and internal failings, Mark's disciples never abandoned Jesus; they repeatedly sought Him for guidance and understanding. Similarly, the Synodal Church is encouraged to persevere through confusion, division, doubt, abuse, and scandal, walking together in faith and practicing discipleship in communion. Imperfection does not disqualify members from striving to follow Jesus; rather, it is through effort, reflection, and shared journeying that genuine discipleship—embodied in synodality—is lived out.

THE AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

The authors' contribution offers new insights into reading Mark's narrative of discipleship, presenting its meaning to contemporary theology and scripture students and to members of the Synodal Church. The study's findings revealed that discipleship in Mark's Gospel is an ongoing process of formation, marked by human limitations, failure, misunderstanding, confusion, and, at times, a lack of faith and trust in God. In Mark's narrative, being receptive, teachable, and committed to staying with Jesus and participating in his mission for several years may not, on its own, lead a follower of Jesus to genuine discipleship as modeled by Jesus. Radical discipleship in Mark is modeled and cultivated through the Christological dimension.

Hence, Jesus alone is the faithful Son who follows his Father's redemptive work and, in his preaching of the gospel, accomplishes his divine mission and Messiahship, exemplifying the one who fulfills the standard of a true disciple. Narrative analysis of the long ending

of Mark's narrative still presents a juxtaposition between the destiny of the Master and that of his followers within Mark's discourse on discipleship, revealing that Jesus' triumph over death surpasses the standard of his discipleship. It contrasts him with disciples whose constant effort failed, leaving them mystified and skeptical of the resurrection (Mk 16:9-13). They were challenged in their doubtful and confused state. After approximately three years of discipleship with Jesus, they needed encouragement to intensify their desire for missionary discipleship (Mk 16:14-18). The narrative critique presents Mark's discipleship as more of companionship and accompaniment in the early stage, meaning "*to be with...*" (Mk 3:14-15), but as a formative process of learning and progressing through stages of training or formation.

Synchronically speaking, Mark's disciples are those who, after staying with Jesus, still made significant mistakes and, when they misunderstood his teachings and directions, repeatedly returned to him for enlightenment and renewal. They differ from members of the synodal Church, who, in similar situations, never stop walking with Christ, with whom they experience renewal and find spiritual nourishment. Christian discipleship in the Synodal Church is a privileged union with Christ. It requires reliance on Jesus's grace to cultivate constant trust and faith in him as one participates deeply in the Church's universal mission. Synodality: participation, communion, and mission, meaning "*hodos*," following Jesus on the way (walking together with Jesus), is a process of ongoing discipleship in a changing world, which requires Christ's transformational power to witness to his mission and follow his radical demands.



CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest—financial, personal, or professional—related to this research. Their theological and philosophical critique follows established academic standards and methods, and their conclusions are solely based on this analysis, free from undisclosed loyalties or personal biases.

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