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How Jesus Starts a Church

Mark 1:14-20

INTRODUCTION

We have mentioned more than a few times that the biggest section in the bookstores today is the Self-Help section and we've talked about what that means about our culture. But what if I asked you what is the second biggest section in the Christian bookstore? It is the church methodology section. With so many experts writing so many books on the subject, you would think we would be pretty good at it by now! And according to the polls *something* does seem to be working. Over the past few decades, even while biblical knowledge plummets, the church's influence shrinks and the morality of Christians reflects the culture exactly, church attendance increases. Now what does that tell us?

In contrast to how the modern world tells us to do church, Jesus does church by calling it into existence. Mark's narrative gives us three principles for church from the call of Christ:

- THE GOSPEL CALL OF JESUS
- THE EFFECTUAL CALL OF JESUS
- THE RADICAL CALL OF JESUS

The Big Idea is that when Jesus starts a church, He does it *with* the gospel *by* the Spirit *to* come and die with him.

It may be helpful to remember here that the church is Jesus' church in every sense. Not only does He purchase his bride and come back for his bride, but He creates her and He calls her at every point. In fact, Jesus is the one who places every brick in the building at just the place where it is: "and on this rock *I will build my church*" [Mat. 16:18]. There is so much loaded into that statement! The church belongs to Jesus. The blueprints are in his mind. The marching orders are in his voice. The membership is in his cross. The numbers are guaranteed in his resurrection. In other words absolutely nothing about the church can be understood apart from the work of Christ being at the center. And consequently there should be no method of 'doing church' that does not follow from this truth.

DOCTRINE

I. THE GOSPEL CALL OF JESUS

A) The gospel is of a kingdom that is *of* God {14}.

1. The good news that Jesus preached is first called the **gospel of God**. By now it should be clear that the “gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” [1:1] and this “gospel of God” [1:14] are the same gospel. So this gospel is to be proclaimed (or heralded or declared) because it is *of* God.

2. The fact that this gospel is of God means that its *origin* is of God, which implies that it comes with the highest authority. But it also means that its *ownership* is of God, which implies that we are not free to edit it or make it more palatable or consumer-friendly.

For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ [2 Cor. 2:17].

Make no mistake, if the gospel of Jesus Christ had its origin in God and its ownership by God in the first century, then it is still the gospel *of God* today! So the choice between being a peddler of God's word and commissioned heralds of God's word will always be the choice—and it's not only the choice for every pastor who ever steps behind a pulpit, but for every Christian who ever chooses which gospel ministry to support. Will we be gospel peddlers or gospel heralds? This is not a choice that you can escape.

B) The gospel is of a kingdom that is invincibly prepared and appearing {15a}.

1. There are two Greek words for time: one which refers to the continual, mundane flow of time where one minute is no different than another (*kronos*) and it is where we get the English word chronology; the other refers to the special moment in time (*kairos*), a time that is not like any other, and this is the one that Mark uses here. So there is chronological time and there is 'kairotic' time: climactic time, momentous, eventful, history-making time, or the time as it is being fulfilled. So when Mark used this word *kairos* he was signifying that this time it's significant—now is the time, the only time, the big moment (the moment for which God created the world and all things! This is the way the Bible speaks of the coming of Christ: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son” [Gal. 4:4], so that God is “making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” [Eph. 1:9-10]. All things came to a climax here.

2. The fullness of time only makes sense to those who are expecting that history is going somewhere because it is His-story. Ancient myths and modern fantasy epics are filled with stories of prophecies and fulfillments and chosen ones and so on. But there is always suspense over the outcome. Not so in the biblical worldview. In the Bible it is good news that God has proven himself trustworthy and all-powerful to do what He said He would do for ages, so that when Paul introduces his explanation of the gospel to the Romans he calls it, “the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son” [Rom. 1:2-3]. So whatever else this kingdom is, it is invincible. Its arrival and its expansion is why the world was made in the first place.

C) The gospel is of a kingdom that demands repentance and belief in another {15b}.

1. There is a new controversy about what the **gospel of the kingdom** is all about. What is the link between this good news about the Son of God and this kingdom that has arrived, forcing us to embrace the gospel? One popular leader of the Emerging Church, Todd Hunter, the former president of Vineyard USA and author of the book *Christianity Beyond Belief* says that,

This pursuit of God and his story has nothing to do with earning some advantage from God, avoiding hell or achieving heaven; it is born from simple, focused desire to arrange our life to follow Jesus...First, this is not a story about an angry God who killed his Son. If the story is only about sin, heaven and hell, we can be forgiven for such a misunderstanding. But now we know it's a story about God and his kingdom, about a way of life in Jesus.¹

This verse—Mark 1:15—is brought in as evidence that the gospel is really all about a kingdom where the King arrives mainly in order to recruit fellow workers to spread his justice throughout the world. “There you have it! There’s the gospel that Jesus preached in plain red letters! The kingdom of God is at hand.” But what is **the kingdom of God**? The phrase appears thirteen other times in Mark’s Gospel. Most theologians typically define it as the rule of Jesus Christ through his church by his gospel. But that still begs some questions. In what way does the church function as a manifestation of the kingdom and why would such a kingdom in any way be good news? What is so good about any of this?

2. How do these social gospellers understand the King’s call to repentance? Well, that is easy. They say that what we are repenting of is our old religion of individualism and the old gospel that promised an escape to heaven. **Repent and believe** is recast as turning away

¹ Todd Hunter, *Christianity Beyond Belief* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 2009); pp. 51, 81

from the old gospel of individual salvation from sins and toward being cooperative friends of Jesus and his mission to restore creation. And this is exactly the language they use. This is now the dominant worldview in the American church. But this doesn't match up with the straightforward language of 1:15.

3. **Believe in** (*pisteuo en*) another, or, trust in something outside of yourself. The Bible does not simply use the gospel as a springboard for personal trust in Jesus, but it is *in* this gospel itself where Jesus is personally trusted in. The two are inseparable—"Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved" [Acts 16:31] and "everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" [Joel 2:32]. Jesus binds himself to his good news just as much as his good news is about him! You cannot separate the good news of a personal relationship with Jesus from the good news of the work of Christ on behalf of sinners. I know that this is just 'Christianity 101' but this simple idea is being attacked from within the church at a feverish pace today.

II. THE EFFECTUAL CALL OF JESUS

A) The content of the gospel *makes* the hearer {15b, 17, 20}.

1. By **effectual call** theologians mean to describe the act of God that makes us born again by the power of his word. So, to give just two instances: "Of his own will he brought us forth *by the word* of truth" [Jam. 1:18], and, "you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, *through the* living and abiding *word* of God" [1 Pet. 1:23]. Now a few verses down in Peter's letter he adds that "this word *is* the good news that was preached to you" [1:25]. So one thing you will notice throughout Mark is that there are two classes of people who hear the word or the gospel call: those who hear and believe and those who hear and reject it. Take this passage today: Why did Zebedee not get out of the boat? Why not the hired servants? So these verses aren't talking simply about the audio hearing of the word with our physical ears. There must be some additional call that these Scriptures are talking about. Paul addresses both together as a problem to solve in Romans 10.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world" [Rom. 10:17-18].

Paul resolves the problem of these two sets of ears by teaching us that God gave Israel the gospel call as clearly as anyone ever received it, but He gave *spiritual ears* to a people who never heard that they even needed them. You can study that out in Romans 9-11.

2. Now our study of the effectual call from Mark 1:14-20 is limited to just a few clues, but they are facts that cry out for explanation. First, these four men who hear Jesus along the seashore are gripped; Second, something in what Jesus said to them is what gripped them. Of his encounter with Simon and Andrew, we read that “Jesus said” (17) and of the encounter with James and John it says that “he called them” (20). So what caused the immediate reaction of the two sets of brothers? Nothing else but the call of Jesus! The three-fold message of a) repent, b) believe, c) follow had some effect on them that,

B) The gospel that is grasped grips and captures the hearer *immediately!* {18, 20}

1. The call of Jesus is the focus here; not the reasoning process or the moral ability of the disciples. The gospel is grasped by the creation of new categories on the mind. The implication between vv. 14-20 is that ‘Repent-Believe-Follow’ was what these four men heard as well. This is what they were responding to. So what do you think works today?

2. Such a radically whole new world creates an instant attraction to it and an instant leaving behind of the old world in the same way as a child just wakes up one day not wanting to watch cartoons or play house anymore. We see the same thing in the calling of Matthew. Now Matthew was a tax collector and therefore a traitor to his people, and his Gospel makes the point to say that he was “sitting at the tax booth” at the moment when Jesus “said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him” [9:9]. This is simply what conversion is and what conversion looks like. It is an irresistibly complete turn:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction... For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God [1 Thess. 1:4-5, 8-9].

So Mark is being very intentional in recording the immediacy of how these four men were struck in their whole soul and dropped everything as if they were embarrassed to be holding it and stumbled over themselves trying to get out of their boats and in line with their Teacher. In fact their boats were like floating coffins and the fish they caught for money were like maggots gathering to consume their corpses:

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live [Jn. 5:25].

Simon, Andrew, James and John leapt out of their floating coffins when they heard the voice of their Creator calling them to life.

III. THE RADICAL CALL OF JESUS

A) Following Jesus means walking with him, though with him in front.

1. In the ancient world the most famous method of teaching was the peripatetic method. A student would seek out a teacher, or rabbi, to follow for the express purpose of being educated by him on the nature of reality. That is what a **disciple** is: one who is disciplined by the renewal of his mind in following some authoritative teacher. Note that it stresses their ‘walk’—*And going on a little farther (19)*—and that is the way they will continue: on a path. A disciple is the same thing as a believer. Following Jesus in obedience is not for some special class of saints; it is the only thing ever produced by the new birth. The word ‘disciple’ is used as a synonym for the word believer throughout the book of Acts; and what does the Great Commission passage say? “Go therefore and make *disciples*” [Mat. 28:20]. But probably the best way to look at this radical call is to, first, keep in mind what Aaron said last week about Jesus being the Prototype—the first Man of the new race—and, second, to note that Jesus commands them here literally, “Come after me,” so that the command to follow is a command to get on the rigorous assembly line after the Prototype.

2. Jesus gives them a picture where their business—*they were fisherman (16)*—would be an analogy for his business—*I will make you become fishers of men (17)*. Obviously the phrase “fishers of men” refers to the catching of souls rather than fish. And it must also mean the saving of a soul and not a flash in the pan or the filling of seats. So we should define the fishing of men as evangelism *by* the content of the gospel *toward* the salvation of their souls. We are not to understand this fishing as the mere art of gathering, such that gospel information can happen once we’ve done that gathering well. The Lord’s work must be done the Lord’s way. Notice that Jesus connects “follow me” and “I will make you” into this thing that I’m doing. So to follow Jesus in his “soul-fishing” is to preach the gospel He preaches. If we don’t preach that gospel then we’re not gathering. Evangelistic success is defined by Jesus as accurately communicating his message to as many people as possible. Don’t leave out either side of that equation!

B) Following Jesus lets goods and kindred go; this mortal life also.

1. The new disciples left everything behind. These four men of the world were immediately no longer men of the world. Simon and Andrew left their whole livelihood. With James and John it says that *they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servant (20)*, which doesn't mean that they left more behind than the other two brothers. Mark simply wanted to paint the whole picture of the life that must be left behind. We do our family and friends no favors by staying in the boat with them while the Lord comes walking by. Jesus teaches this without apologies:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple [Lk. 14:26].

2. He said this about “anyone” who would come to him to be his disciple—*anyone*. This is not some isolated story that I am straining application out of it that it isn't there. Jesus is saying that for *anyone* who would come to him, it must look like this immediate, total renunciation of the old world you thought was real.

C) Following Jesus is unqualified and therefore implies death.

1. These four new disciples were bad customers. They just up and left with no questions asked. They never bothered to ask Jesus, “But what happens once we start walking that way?” or “What's going to happen to all the things we're already committed to once we make this commitment?” Bad customers. But then again, they weren't customers at all!

2. In the modern West—that is Europe and America in the last two hundred years plus—too many Christians have gotten the idea that it is OK to be a carnal, cultural Christian: the notion that there are two acceptable kinds of Christians, the committed and the not so committed (but perfectly sincere!). In his classic *The Cost of Discipleship*, the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this idea Cheap Grace:

Cheap grace means grace sold on the market for cheapjacks' wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices...Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner...Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.²

Mark 1:14-20 sets the stage for the beginning of costly grace, not cheap grace. And why? Because even though salvation is free, the Christian life is going to cost you everything.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Touchstone, New York 1995, fp. 1937); p. 43, 44-45

APPLICATION

To the Skeptic – One of the greatest evidences of the supernatural character of the Christian faith is its life-changing effect on those who believe. It is easy in times of comfort for skeptics to dismiss belief as the half-witted, mind-numbed crutch of the weak. It is more difficult to pull that in times of great persecution. And the Christian church emerged out of centuries of persecution. When Jesus called to people of this world, people of all different stripes left everything behind for a harder life and often a sudden and painful death. Every world religion grew up in isolation and comfort. People in power called armies together, called the rich, tailored their message, sacked the institutions and forced compliance—*every world religion started this way—except one: Christianity*. The followers of Christ spent their first three hundred years on the run, underground, but even under pain of execution and torture they couldn't get away from the call of their Master. One of the earliest Christian symbols was a fish that you now see on cars everywhere with an acronym made up of the Greek letters ΙΧΘΥΣ (*Iesous Christos theou uios soter*). It was a secret message etched in the sand to see whether or not you were one of them. That was the kind of care this early movement had to take to exist. Every world religion took centuries to gain ground even though they did it by force against little armed resistance. Christianity was illegal, in the grip of the most powerful Empire the world had ever seen, and it took over that world overnight. There is nothing else in history like that. Surely the skeptic ought to consider the other-worldly power of the call of Christ.

Other religious leaders call the strong into a cause or the weak into a cult, the seeker into the mountains to ponder and the suburbanite into a sanctified version of the American dream. But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Christ calls a man to himself, he bids him come and die.” That’s not normal.

To the Saint – Consider the implications of how Jesus starts a church for how we should do church. Remember that the church that we have will be the same church that Jesus builds. We can't build it any other way than He does: “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” [Ps. 127:1]. At a recent pastor's conference a well known Christian author made the comment that we are to be effective, not simply faithful (he was poking at those who make the point that we are called to be faithful regardless of the results). First of all, I would challenge the idea that being faithful and being effective are ever different things in Scripture. But if we have the choice between being faithful to the gospel and sticking our fingers in the wind to see what works, then we pick faithfulness every time:

Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ [1 Cor. 3:10-11].

We have seen Jesus' *gospel* call, his *effectual* call and his *radical* call, or, to repeat the big idea: when Jesus starts a church, He does it *with* the gospel *by* the Spirit *to* come and die with him. Do we build churches and attend churches (remember, no one is exempt) that make its first order of business the accurate, passionate preaching of this gospel with the expectation that the Spirit will give the growth to whomever He wills whenever He wills? Do we call people to total discipleship in our gospel call? Here's the reality: If we care about the content of the gospel and our radical separation from everything that is not the gospel, we just will horrify people and we will be tempted at every turn to give in and to try anything else besides this call. But *this* is the only call there will ever be, that is worth it.

To the Sinner – You have heard once again that you are to “repent and believe” specifically because the time has come or that the King has come. Do you feel any sense of urgency about that? If not, then my job is to tell you today that this lack of feeling any urgency about this message is yet another serious sin. The inability to feel urgency over the “fullness of time” given how little time you have left is unspeakably evil. Where is the fear of God and our love for God when we can see that this is his message for us and we turn from it and yawn! If God himself is filled with a sense of urgency for us to hear this and respond to it urgently, then where is our sense of urgency, considering we are the ones who will have infinitely terrible things happen to us if we do not respond immediately! What a terrible sin it is—beyond my ability to describe—for us to just sit in the boats mending our nets uncomprehending when God himself kindly addresses us in this text!

CONCLUSION

Jesus *did* start a church. You read about it here. There is no other church but this one that Jesus started. His call to these initial four disciples is still his call to every disciple today. If you are saved, then you are a disciple of Christ. And if you are a disciple of Christ, then this is the call you heard and love to hear to this day. If his call does nothing for you, then please, repent, believe and follow—the time is here.