Introductory Study for the Gospel of Mark

As we consider studying the life and work of Jesus Christ as it is recorded in Mark’s account, we need to remind ourselves of why such a study is central to our faith and all of life. Mark Noll has these helpful comments to contribute:

Christianity is defined by the person and work of Jesus Christ. The doctrinal truths supporting this assertion — as set out in Scripture and summarized in the major Christian creeds — provide a compelling reason for pursuing human learning. At the same time, they also offer strong protection against the abuses of human learning. Understanding more about Christ and his work not only opens a wide doorway to learning, but also checks tendencies toward idolatry that are as potent among scholars as in the rest of mankind.

The person of Christ and the work of Christ must, however, be considered in the fullness of Christian faith. The trinity — Father, Son, and Spirit in the unity of the Godhead — provides the essential, if also deeply mysterious, starting point. Other aspects of Christian faith also play a part in human learning: for example, the divine creation of the world, the fact of human sinfulness, God’s merciful resolve to rescue sinners, the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, and the providential oversight of everything that ever takes place. Yet intrinsic to all such Christian realities are the person of Christ and the meaning of his work for all humanity in all human history. To understand that person and to fathom that work is to approach the center of Christianity itself. (Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind, Mark A. Noll, pg. ix)

The apostle Paul in his opening remarks to the Christians who lived in Rome helps us see how Jesus Christ is the critical link between the promises and redemptive work of God in the Old Testament through Israel — a redemptive work occasioned by God’s creation of a good world followed by man’s failure to trust, love and obey God resulting in a curse that has distorted the world and brought it under the bondage of sin and the influence of Satan — and the beginning of the fulfillment of those promises and of the kingdom of God.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God — the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus our Lord. Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.

Romans 1:1-5
Larry Hurtado, Jonathan Pennington and Mark Strauss offer these views of the type of literature that the four Gospels in the New Testament represent along with the purpose they serve:

The characteristic that unites all four New Testament Gospels is the presentation of the ministry of Jesus, describing him in ways that accord with Christian faith. He is, for example, described as the fulfillment of Old Testament (OT) promises of a God-appointed figure (Messiah) who would represent and carry out salvation for Israel and for all nations. The Gospels use titles such as Son of God, Christ (Messiah), and Lord, and consistently portray Jesus as sent by God. This sort of portrayal of Jesus means that writers of the Gospels present Jesus for the purpose of encouraging faith in him; they are not simply trying to give a documentary account for historical study.

...The impetus for writing the Gospels did not spring from biographical interests, at least as we today would know them, but from a desire to encourage and shape faith in Jesus. Therefore, while it is important for scholars to study the Gospels against the background of the ancient literature from the Greco-Roman world, it remains a fact that the most important context for understanding the Gospels is the life of the early church and the nature of its faith.

(UBCS, Mark, Larry W. Hurtado, pp. 2, 4)

Our canonical Gospels are the theological, historical, aretological (virtue-forming) biographical narratives that retell the story and proclaim the significance of Jesus Christ, who through the power of the Spirit is the Restorer of God’s reign.

(Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction, Jonathan Pennington, pg. 35)

In summary, we can classify the Gospels as historical narrative motivated by theological concerns. Their intention is not only to convey accurate historical material about Jesus but also to explain and interpret these salvation-bringing events. The Gospels were written not by detached, uninterested observers but by Evangelists, ‘proclaimers of good news,” announcing the good news of Jesus Christ and calling people to faith in him.

(Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels, Mark L. Strauss, pg. 29)

Jonathan Pennington describes what he believes to be the critical role of the four Gospels.

I like to think of the fourfold Gospel book, or Tetraevangelium [the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John], as the keystone in a Roman archway. The keystone is essential for holding together both sides of the archway, and it alone enables the arch to stand and serve as an entryway. So too, the fourfold Gospel book functions as the portion of Holy Scripture that is so fitted and placed that it holds together the archway with its two sides—the Old Testament Scriptures on the one side and the rest of the New Testament on the other. The Gospel accounts complete and make ultimate sense of the story of God’s work in the world as found in the Jewish Scriptures, while at the same time they serve as the fountainhead for the rest of the apostolic witness and teaching. The fourfold witness of the Gospels provides the guiding principle (even regula fidei) and lodestar for understanding and standing under all of Holy Scripture. The Gospels providentially and uniquely stand at the interpretive fulcrum for reading
all of the Bible, for they focus on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the final Word spoken by God.  
(*Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*, Jonathan T. Pennington, pg. 231)

R. T. France offers these insights on the author, place and time of the writing of Mark’s Gospel:

This, then is an account of Jesus as he was understood by a leader in a Christian church sometime soon after the middle of the first century. It is questionable how important it is for us to be any more specific than that, even if that should prove to be possible. Just when and where the book was written, and by whom, interesting as they must be to historical scholarship, are not questions which are likely to have a major impact on its exegesis. The evidence usually adduced as a means of answering these questions is derived from the character and content of the book itself, so that on this basis there is an inevitable circularity in any attempt to determine the book’s meaning from its supposed place or time of origin. Only if the external evidence of early church traditions about the book’s origin is given greater weight than arguments from internal characteristics can we expect to find much exegetical enlightenment from a discussion of its provenance, and modern scholarship has been virtually unanimous in playing down the significance of external evidence (though I shall go on to suggest that this scepticism about early church tradition is not always justified).

Another reason for caution in expecting any great exegetical help from establishing the place and time of the book’s origin relates to the purpose for which gospels were written. In much of twentieth-century scholarship it has been taken for granted not only that a gospel was written in the context of a particular local church situation but also that its aim was to speak specifically to that situation. So understood, the gospels are to be interpreted in a way similar to that of the Pauline epistles as local, contingent texts, not as intended for the universal circulation which was in fact to be their destiny. On this basis much modern study of the gospels (notable the ‘corrective’ approaches outlined above) has been similar to the practice of ‘mirror-reading’ Paul’s epistles in order to reconstruct the local situations and concerns to which they were directed, and exegesis of their contents has been based on that presumed reconstruction. But in 1995 an important query was placed against such an assessment of the literary character and purpose of the gospels by Richard Baukham in his lecture ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written?’, and the subsequent development of his thoughts on the subject by colleagues has reinforced his arguments that the supposed local focus of the gospels has been assumed rather than argued, and is in fact a rather improbable assumption. If Baukham is right, and I think he is, the relevance of the historical provenance of the gospel for its exegesis becomes significantly less, since its intended message is not specifically focused on, still less limited to, the local Christian community out of which it emerged.

The comments that follow with regard to where, when, and by whom this book was written can therefore be quite brief, as they do not materially affect the main purpose of this commentary, which is the understanding of the text.
Early church traditions about Mark’s gospel, beginning with Papias at the beginning of the second century (or rather with the ‘Elder’ whom Papias quotes, and thus reaching back into the first century), agree, where they offer specific comment on these points, that the author was called Mark (this Mark being assumed to be the same one who appears at various points in the NT as a companion and colleague of Barnabas, Paul and Peter), that he derived his material from the preaching of Peter, with whom he was closely associated, and that the work was compiled in Rome or, more generally, ‘in Italy’. This account of the origin of the gospel is repeated with minor variations in Papias, the Anti-Marcionite and Monarchian Prologues, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Ephraem, Epiphanius, and Jerome; where the place of writing is not specifically mentioned (Papias, Tertullian, and Origen), it is assumed on the basis of the link with Peter’s ministry in Rome. The traditional association of Mark with the church of Alexandria is not allowed to detract from this general understanding of the gospel’s origin: Eusebius, H.E. 2.15-16 explains that Mark came to Egypt after he had written his gospel in Rome, and Epiphanius, Haer. 6.10 says that Peter sent him there after he had written the gospel.

The only significant discrepancy among these early patristic notices is over whether Mark wrote the gospel before or after Peter’s death (which is normally dated A.D. 64 or 65). Modern scholarship (perhaps because it better suits their preferred dating) tend to quote only Irenaeus’s statement (Haer. 3.1.1) that Mark wrote (post excessum) of Peter and Paul; cf. the Anti-Marcionite Prologue, post excessionem Petri. But the assumption that these terms refer to Peter’s death is not certain, and is cast in doubt by the wording of the tradition in ‘Ephraem’s’ commentary on the Diatessaron, where the Latin version reads cum abiisset Romam, which surely refers to relocation rather than death.

The tradition of the early church then affirms consistently that this gospel was written by Mark in Rome as a record of Peter’s teaching, most probably while Peter was still alive and therefore not later than the early sixties of the first century.

(NIGTC, The Gospel of Mark, R. T. France, pp. 35-38)

Robert Stein provides some background on the emergence of Mark within the study of the Gospels through history.

During the first seventeen centuries of church history the Gospel of Mark was for the most part the forgotten Gospel. Matthew proved far more useful for catechetical purposes than Mark (or Luke) because of its careful arrangement of Jesus’ teachings into five sections (chs. 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 23-25) that all end similarly (“And when Jesus finished these sayings” [7:28]; “And when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples” [11:1]; “And when Jesus had finished these parables” [13:53]; “Now when Jesus had finished these sayings” [19:1]; and “When Jesus had finished all these sayings” [26:1 italics added]) and are placed alternately between six sections of narrative (chs. 1-4, 8-9, 11-12, 14-17, 19-22, and 26-28). Consequently, Mark received little attention during this period. That almost all the material in Mark, except 1:1; 3:20-21; 4:21-25; 6:30-31; 8:22-26’ 9:38-40; 12:32-34; and 14:51-52 (23 of the 666 verses in Mark), is contained in some form in Matthew, along with much additional material (the “Q” material [common material found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark] and “M” material [material found only in Matthew]), gave additional importance
and prominence to Matthew. In addition, Augustine’s statement also contributed to the relative insignificance of Mark during this period:

Mark follows him [Matthew] closely, and looks like his attendant and epitomizer. For in his narrative he gives nothing in concert with John apart from the others; by himself separately, he has little to record; in conjunction with Luke, as distinguished from the rest, he has still less; but in concord with Matthew, he has a very large number of passages. Much, too, he narrates in words almost numerically and identically the same as those used by Matthew, where the agreement is either with that evangelist alone, or with him in connection with the rest. (De consensus evangelistarum 1.2.4)

This changed radically in the eighteenth century, when the search for the earliest sources available for “the quest of the historical Jesus“ came to recognize that Mark was not the abbreviator of Matthew but rather his predecessor and source. The view that Mark was the first canonical Gospel written and served as a source for both Matthew and Luke came to be the prevailing view of nineteenth-century NT scholarship and continues to be the dominant view today. The impetus to discover the Jesus of history led to an intense study of the oldest written source available for such an investigation—the Gospel of Mark. From its place of obscurity in Gospel studies for over seventeen hundred years, Mark now gained the place of prominence, and its arrangement of the Jesus traditions was seen as providing a chronological framework for understanding the life of Jesus.

By the end of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth century, NT scholars saw in Mark the earliest written account of the life of Jesus dating in the late 60s, but a new question came to the forefront: “What was the shape of the gospel traditions found in Mark (and also Matthew and Luke) before being written down?“ After World War I, the discipline of form criticism, led by a triumvirate of German scholars (K. L. Schmidt, 1919; M. Dibelelius, 1919; and R. Bultmann, 1921) and already applied to the study of the OT, now began to dominate Gospel studies. The focus now shifted from the study of the Gospels as wholes to the study of the individual units and building blocks that make up the Gospels (Stein 2001: 173–233). These blocks were investigated to learn about the Christian community during the “oral period“ between the resurrection of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. For some, this new discipline also served as a tool for studying the life and teachings of Jesus. The form critics lost interest in the holistic approach to the Gospels and now considered the Gospel writers as simply collectors of tradition and editors who patched together tradition collections using scissors and paste.

It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that interest in the Gospel writers surfaced again in the rise of a new discipline—redaction criticism. Most responsible for this was again a triumvirate of German scholars (Bornkamm, 1948; Conzelmann, 1954; and W. Marxsen, 1956). This new discipline demonstrated that the Gospel writers were not bland, disinterested editors who simply collected various gospel traditions and pasted them together. They were rather evangelists who collected, arranged, edited, and shaped these traditions with specific theological
purposes in mind. As a result, a great interest arose in the study of the specific theological contributions given to the gospel traditions by the individual evangelists. This was most easily carried out with Matthew and Luke by comparing how they used their Markan source and by comparing their use of the Q material. By comparing them to Mark in a synopsis, various emphases of Matthew and Luke became quite clear, and their individual editorial contributions were then investigated throughout each Gospel. Thus a more holistic approach to Gospel studies developed that viewed the Gospels not as collections of isolated fragments of gospel tradition but rather as “the Gospel according to Matthew” and “the Gospel according to Luke.”

The application of redaction criticism to the study of Mark, however, is far more complicated, for whereas we possess the main source of Matthew and Luke (the Gospel of Mark) and can reconstruct to a reasonable extent the content of their Q source, we do not possess the source(s) of Mark, and the reconstruction of their shape and form is much more hypothetical (Stein 1970; 1971; 2001: 262–72). Nevertheless, a cautious use of redaction criticism is nevertheless not as holistic a discipline as it first seems, for it is primarily concerned not with the evangelist’s theology as a whole but rather with his unique theological contribution (Stein 1969: 54). Thus the main emphasis shared by Matthew, Mark, and Luke are essentially ignored.

A recent attempt to address this is found in literary and narrative criticism, where the total Gospel narrative is the focus of attention. Here great attention is given to the plot of the entire narrative, and we are introduced to such concepts as characterization, point of view, plot, setting, viewpoint, narrator, real author, implied author, real reader, implied reader, and so on. Whereas the holistic approach taken by narrative criticism to the entire narrative is commendable, its practice is often associated with assumptions that when applied to the Gospels are highly questionable. One involves the fact that the principles of narrative criticism have been obtained primarily from the study of fictional literature. Consequently, the approach often assumes that “Mark is a self-consciously crafted narrative, a fiction, resulting from literary imagination, not photographic recall” (Tolbert 1989: 30). It emphasizes far more the freedom of the author in composing the narrative than the restrictions placed upon him by history and tradition. In fiction such questions as the following are legitimate: Why does the author choose to have the main character crucified? Why does the main character rise from the dead? Why does the story choose to have a particular character (King Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas, etc.) act in a particular way? Why is a particular group portrayed in this manner? Yet in the study of Mark such questions are often out of place. It makes no sense to ask: Why does Mark have Jesus crucified at the end? Why does he have the high priests and chief priest involved in the death of Jesus? Why does he have Judas Iscariot, betray Jesus? Why does he have Jesus rise from the dead? Such questions are illegitimate in that Mark is a “historical narrative,” and Mark did not have the freedom to construct his plot and characterizations in the same way that a writer of fiction does. The historical events surrounding the life of Jesus controlled what Mark could or could not do. Even if one denies the historicity of much of the Gospel accounts, the fact remains that Mark was constrained by the gospel traditions he inherited and with which his readers were familiar. Thus some of the questions that
one can ask about the narrative of a fictional account created by an author de novo are inappropriate when asked concerning historical narrative (Horsley 2001: 7).

A second weakness of much narrative criticism is its close association with reader-response criticism. The lasting quality of a good commentary on Mark (or any biblical book) lies not in the meaning that a commentator chooses to read into it but in how well it enables the reader to understand the meaning of the evangelist contained in the written text he has provided. The great majority of readers seek help in a commentary on Mark for understanding the word from God that he has spoken through his servant Mark. Consequently, the present commentary is not a “reader-response“ commentary revealing how I choose to read Mark. Such an approach (in the past often called “eisegesis“) is rejected in favor of seeking to describe for the reader what Mark sought to convey by the words of the text he has written. … (BECNT, Mark, Robert H. Stein, pp. 15-19)

R. T. France discusses the various views concerning the relationship between the three synoptic gospels (so called because they share a common view and can be seen together which is what is meant by a synopsis [Exploring the New Testament: A Guide to The Gospels & Acts, David Wenham & Steve Walton, pg. 302]).

One other aspect of tradition which may have an effect on exegesis belongs not to the tradition of the early church but to that of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship: the theory of literary relationships of the three Synoptic Gospels which is presupposed. The importance of this issue for exegesis is illustrated by the startling difference in approach found in C. S. Mann’s Anchor Bible commentary of 1986 when compared with virtually all other recent commentaries on Mark, since Mann believes in the priority of Matthew, and so interprets Mark as a deliberate revision of the material earlier recorded by Matthew. It may be useful, therefore, for me to set out at the beginning what view I take of synoptic relationships, so that the exegesis that follows can be assessed in the light of that prior assumption.

The introduction to a commentary is not the place for a full discussion of the Synoptic Problem. I have gone as far in that direction as I ever expect to do in print in my Matthew, Evangelist and Teacher, pp. 24−49). Here I simply summarize the main lines of that discussion, which still represents my understanding of the question, with the hope that any reader wanting further elaboration will be willing to find it there.

The publication of W. R. Framer’s The Synoptic Problem (1964) marked the first significant reopening of what had been generally regarded during the earlier part of the twentieth century as a closed question. The classical ‘Streeterian’ theory of the priority of Mark, the existence of a lost document Q, and the direct literary dependence of both Matthew and Luke on these two sources was assumed to have been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt, even though a few Catholic scholars continued to argue for the priority of Matthew and the problem of the ‘minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark‘ had never quite been defused. Farmer’s book not only raised significant doubts as to how far the now traditional two-source theory could in fact account for the very complex data of synoptic relationships, but also enthusiastically resurrected the nineteenth-century ‘Griesbach Hypothesis’ (priority of Matthew, uses of
Matthew by Luke, and Mark as the final ‘mediating’ gospel based on Matthew and Luke) as a radically different explanation which, among its other attractions, eliminated the need to postulate a hypothetical Q. Since 1964, therefore, debate on the Synoptic Problem has sprung to life again.

Forty years on it may safely be said that the two-source theory remains by far the most widely supported and assumed account of synoptic origins. But it no longer holds the field with the unquestioned dominance of the earlier part of the twentieth century. Radically oversimplifying the situation, we may observe that at least three other approaches have become widely established. One is the Griesbach Hypothesis itself, which has won a significant number of converts from a wide variety of theological and ecclesiastical backgrounds, though it remains very much a minority movement. Another is a tendency, while accepting the priority of Mark, to treat the documentary existence of Q with some skepticism, whether by denying the need for Q altogether (notably in the work of M. D. Goulder) or less radically by preferring to speak of a ‘Q’ strand of tradition (some or all of it more likely oral than written) rather than of a single document. The third is the view, promoted by E. P. Sanders and developed by J. A. T. Robinson among others, that both the two-source theory and the Griesbach Hypothesis (as well as other similarly ‘neat’ solutions to the Synoptic Problem) are a good deal too simple, and that the process by which our NT gospels were formed is likely to have been more complex and fluid than a matter of simple literary dependence of one writer on another. It is the third strand of thinking that I find most persuasive.

The essential basis for Robinson’s view is well summarized in the following statement:

We have been accustomed for so long to what might be called linear solutions to the synoptic problem, where one gospel simply ‘used‘ another and must be set later, that it is difficult to urge a more fluid and complex interrelation between them and their traditions without being accused of introducing unnecessary hypotheses and modifications. But if we have learnt anything over the past fifty years it is surely that whereas epistles were written for specific occasions (though they might be added to or adapted later), gospels were essentially for continuous use in the preaching, teaching, apologetic and liturgical life of the Christian communities. They grew out of and with the needs. One can only put approximate dates to certain states or stages and set a certain terminus ad quem for them, according to what they do or do not reflect. And at any stage in this development one must be prepared to allow for cross-fertilization between the ongoing traditions.

This concept of ‘cross-fertilization’ rather than purely ‘linear dependence’ seems to me to take more realistic account of the likely growth of gospel traditions in the first-century churches, which were not sealed units but remained in contact with one another as Christians travelled around the eastern part of the empire — the sort of free movement of Christian leaders and teachers which is so graphically illustrated at a slightly later period in Did. 11-12. In such a situation it would be natural for traditions about Jesus to be shared and compared, and for collections of what later came to be known as ‘gospel’ material to grow up in different locations, each in its own distinctive
form but with constant opportunity for influence and expansion from traditions preserved in other church centres. Thus when a Matthew or a Luke came to compile the material about Jesus available to him, it would be a rich mixture of distinctive traditions preserved in his own church together with a more extensive range of material in common circulation among the churches, probably largely in oral form though no doubt with some written material available (hence perhaps the more verbatim agreements in parts of the ‘Q’ material), as indeed Luke 1:1 explicitly tells us.

Mark’s situation was, according to church tradition, rather different, in that he had direct access to one major oral source of Jesus tradition, the teaching of Peter, and his recording of that tradition clearly provided Matthew and Luke with the most significant single component in their collections. In that sense, I would continue to maintain the priority of Mark and the likelihood that Matthew and Luke depended on him rather than vice versa. But that does not entail that at every point Mark’s version of a given tradition must be the starting point for the synoptic development. It is entirely possible that the versions available to Matthew or Luke may have taken shape earlier than Mark’s writing up of those same stories or sayings, and indeed also that Mark himself (and even Peter?) benefited from traditions coming from other church centres. Thus while I regard Mark as the earliest of the surviving gospels to be produced in its present form, it does not seem to me necessary to conclude that at all points Mark represents an earlier form of the tradition than that preserved in either Matthew or Luke.

Here is Robinson’s understanding of the issue of literary ‘priority’ among the Synoptic Gospels:

We must be open to seeing that the most primitive state of the triple, or ‘Markan’, tradition (as indeed most scholars would agree in relation to the double, or ‘Q’, tradition) is not consistently or exclusively to be found in any one gospel, to which we must then assign overall temporal priority. Rather I believe that there was written (as well as oral) tradition underlying each of them, which is sometimes preserved in its most original form by Matthew, sometimes by Luke, though most often, I would judge, by Mark. Hence the strength of the case for the priority of Mark, which is nevertheless overstated when this gospel is itself regarded as the foundation-document of the other two. The gospels as we have them are to be seen as parallel, though by no means isolated, developments of common material for different spheres of the Christian mission, rather than a series of documents standing in simple chronological sequence.

I would disagree with this estimate by Robinson only in that I would wish to give greater weight than he does to the tradition of Mark’s dependence on Peter, which would seem to place Mark in a more ‘privileged’ position than Matthew or Luke with regard to his access to the apostolic tradition. In that case Mark is likely to have been less dependent on collecting traditions from a variety of sources, and his work is more likely to have been used as a primary source of Jesus traditions by the other two synoptic evangelists. I would thus lay greater emphasis on the ‘priority’ of Mark than Robinson’s cautious words suggest, but would agree with him that this priority is not to
be construed in terms of a simple linear dependence which entails Mark’s version of a
given tradition must always be understood to be the starting point.

I do not believe that I have solved the Synoptic Problem, nor do I believe that anyone
else has provided an explanation which does full justice to all the extraordinarily
complex data. But the attraction to me of Robinson’s typically unconventional
approach is that it suggests that a full ’solution’ is neither possible nor necessary, that
any tidily defined scheme of literary dependence, whether as simple as Goulder’s or as
complex as Boismard’s, fails to do justice to the rich variety and cross-fertilization of
Jesus traditions which might reasonably be expected to have occurred within the living
and mobile complexity of early Christian preaching and teaching across the eastern
Mediterranean world of the first century. In the light of that situation, I do not need a
solution to the Synoptic Problem.
(NIGTC, The Gospel of Mark, R. T. France, pp. 41-45)

Donald English, David Garland and James Edwards complete our overview and
background notes on the Gospel of Mark. Donald English addresses the
question why we should read Mark’s Gospel by identifying some of the
questions Mark’s Gospel answers. David Garland speaks to the contemporary
significance of Mark’s Gospel and James Edwards addresses the difficult but
important task of remaining faithful to the truth about Jesus even in the face of a
culture and world whose high value on pluralism finds such a revelation deeply
offensive.

Our first question must be: ‘Why should we read Mark’s gospel at all?’ There is the
obvious answer that it is there, and that we don’t want to miss anything. There is
further the now widely accepted fact that Mark’s was the first of the New Testament
gospels to be written, and was used by Matthew and Luke. But the other New
Testament gospels are longer, and each has a more apparent distinctiveness — Matthew
with the strongly Jewish background, Luke with his commitment to outcast groups, and
John with the great I Am themes. What has Mark to offer by comparison with these?

It used to be thought that Mark was, by contrast, a simple, straightforward account of
the story of Jesus, set out chronologically. That approach shouldn’t be wholly
abandoned, since in broad terms it remains true. It also safeguards some important
insights into Mark’s intention, not least the way in which he shows the shadow of the
cross hanging over the ministry of Jesus from the very beginning.

Yet it is equally clear that Mark shows little interest in close or detailed historical
linkage between one story and the next. Nor does he include material vital to a pure
historian concerning Jesus’ ancestry, birth or childhood. It is not a biography of Jesus.
What happened after the resurrection is largely omitted too, if, as will be suggested
later, the original version of Mark’s gospel ended at Mark 16:8. He is equally free of
pressure to provide exact geographical locations. Stories move from scene to scene
without explanation. It is clear that something else concerns him much more. This
‘something else’ is the most important element in the introduction to the reading of the
gospel itself. It uncovers the purpose of the writer and the prospect for the reader.
The best way to discover the intention of Mark is to read *his own expression of purpose*, wherever he has tried to make it plain. We can go on to examine *focal points of the teaching contained* in the gospel. What Mark emphasizes should help us to grasp his purpose more clearly. Then there is the task of *reading the stories* Mark tells, trying sympathetically to get into them, and to discern the reason for their presence in the gospel from within the account itself. Questions of *the materials on which Mark drew* are not unimportant, but they must not distract our attention from the texture of the gospel itself. We need to try also to *understand the people* who figure in the stories. They are important for a discovery of what the gospel is about. Other people are important, too. There are *those for whom the gospel was first written*. What we can know or surmise about their attitudes, experiences and needs will help us better to see how Mark’s gospel related to them. And *we must not forget ourselves* as we, under the inspiration of the same Spirit who led the writer, seek to be addressed by him through the Scripture as we take it up now.

The task is not a simple one. It has some of the characteristics of solving a mystery! But it is deeply challenging and spiritually rewarding for all who are willing to commit themselves to it. The element of commitment will be constantly present.

[Concerning Mark’s purpose in writing his Gospel] There is no ambiguity here! The opening thirteen verses set it out with breathtaking clarity.

There is, first, the idea of ‘The beginning of the gospel‘ (1:1). Something new is being launched. Much has been made of Mark’s use, for the first time, of gospel as a way of tabulating the good news (which is what ‘gospel’ means) in a written form. There is something more significant even than that, however. The word ‘gospel‘ had a meaning prior to that of either ‘message‘ or ‘written document‘. It was originally used to describe an ‘epoch-making event‘. For example, the birth of the future Emperor Augustus was described as ‘gospel‘, meaning a happening which would change world history. Mark certainly offers gospel as good news. Equally clearly he is presenting it for the first time as a whole account in written form. Perhaps most important of all however he is announcing an event after which the history of the world will never again be the same.

At the centre of this event is Jesus Christ. Mark makes it clear that the person at the heart of his story establishes continuity with God’s previous activity in the world, hence the quotations from the Old Testament (1:2–3). There is also a testimony from John the Baptist, seen as the prophet promised in the Old Testament who would precede the coming of the Messiah — God’s anointed who delivers Israel (1:4–8). After John, if he is properly regarded in Old Testament terms, the next will be the Messiah.

This is precisely what the voice from heaven, during John’s baptism of Jesus, makes clear. The ‘You are my Son’ of 1:11 provides the closing bracket of the parenthesis which began with ‘the Son of God‘ in 1:1. Mark could hardly be clearer about his view of who Jesus is.
We seem to be on the same track when Mark describes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He announces nothing less than ‘the kingdom of God’. Because it has drawn, or is drawing, near, people must repent and believe the gospel (1:14–15).

This picture of the Messiah sent from God is made even more compelling by the demonstration, beyond words of preaching, in the miracles Jesus performed. For the first eight chapters of this gospel there is a quite breathless presentation of one work of power after another. Mark needs to keep using the word ‘immediately’ because he is hurrying his readers along from one example of the release of divine energy to the next.

If this gospel was written as some kind of training material for new Christians, or for early Christian evangelists, as some have suggested, then the evidence so far is clear and convincing. The powerful Son of God overcomes all problems brought to him. The kingdom of God is focused on him. Those who come to him in need are taught, healed and delivered. ‘We have never seen anything like this!’ (2:12), becomes the appropriate response.

It is much too simple a conclusion, however, to assume that Mark’s sole intention is to portray Jesus as the powerful Son of God. It is probably not even his main purpose. The high Christology of the first thirteen verses, and the excitement of the miracles in the first eight chapters, are increasingly seen in Mark’s gospel as the necessary preliminary to something else.

The first hint about that ‘something else’ comes at the outset of Jesus’ preaching ministry as Mark records it. People are called not just to hear that the kingdom of God is imminent, but to do something about it. They should ‘repent and believe the good news’. We are justified in picking up that theme also as the gospel unfolds. Mark is pointing us to a double thrust in his message. It is about who Jesus is. It is also about how people should respond to Jesus. These two themes run right through the Gospel of Mark. They form the basic materials for the telling of the story of Jesus.

Neither of those themes stays the same as the gospel unfolds. What is more, the development of each points us towards a more accurate definition of Mark’s purpose.

There has been a long tradition of noting the significant change in the tone and direction of Jesus’ ministry in Mark’s gospel after the accounts of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi ‘You are the Christ’ (8:27–30) and of the transfiguration of Jesus (9:2–13), where the emphasis is again on the identity of Jesus. ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!’ Before this time the concentration is on addressing the crowds, with attention to who Jesus might be. After it there is more concentration on training the disciples, and the focal point about Jesus is not who he is but what he has come to accomplish. This is particularly encapsulated in three repetitive passages (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34). There is great value in that perception of the way Jesus lovingly helped his disciples towards the truth about himself and his vocation.

What has also to be recognized, however, and what is perhaps even more germane to Mark’s purpose in gathering the material in this way, is that these two stories (at Caesarea Philippi and on the transfiguration mountain) also make a significant change
in the presentation of the two key themes so far: namely, who Jesus is, and how we should respond to him.

What is noticeable about the identity of Jesus is the striking alterations of strategy in his ministry, without any loss in its authority. From Mark 8 onwards Jesus goes steadily on to the confrontation with the religious authorities, speaking as he goes about the inevitability of suffering, rejection and death for himself. The all-powerful healer and miracle-worker suddenly becomes the one who submits to the fate of crucifixion (8:31, etc.), despite protests from Peter about such a course (8:32). He knows the pain that will be involve (14:32-42). He does not even defend himself against false evidence at his trial (14:61).

Yet at no point does Mark give any impression of Jesus being anything other than in total control of the situation. The contrast is not between a time of self-assured success, followed by a period of uncontrollable decline. Jesus walks from one phase to the other with determination and confidence. He predicts what will happen. We are given to feel that even at his trial he knows better than anyone else what is happening. The demonstration of power in the first half of the gospel, and the lowly path to the cross in the second are part of the one process of doing the will of his Father, part of the one way of being who he is and of doing what he came to do. They belong inextricably together. That will be a vital clue as we try to discern Mark’s message about Jesus and the kingdom of God.

The same point is made in a different way if we consider the titles used of Jesus in Mark’s gospel. The two most significant are ‘Son of God’ and ‘Son of Man’.

The background of *Son of God* is in Old Testament passages like 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalms 2:7 and 89:26-27. It is used sometimes of Israel’s kings and sometimes of the messianic king who will come to deliver God’s people. When this title is used in Mark the reader has to decide in the context which use is the more likely. The accounts of the baptism of Jesus, the transfiguration, and the trial before the Sanhedrin require a messianic interpretation. The comment on the text will argue that the same is true when the demon-possessed cry out and call Jesus ‘Son of God’. There may be something more subtle about the use of this title towards the end of the gospel. At the crucifixion of Jesus, the centurion had a much more earthy view of Jesus when he used such language. But Mark could be making a point which will come out even more clearly below, namely, that those who have eyes to see will perceive that the soldier’s words were more meaningful than he knew. If so, then we are very near to the heart of Mark’s gospel. But that is to jump ahead.

Alongside the use of Son of God is the more frequent use of *Son of Man*. The background in the Old Testament is again varied. In Psalm 8:4 it refers to humankind. In Daniel 7:1 it refers to a heavenly figure honoured by God. In Ezekiel it is the prophet’s way of being addressed by God.

Mark makes clear that this is Jesus’ favoured way of describing himself. It occurs in the gospel at a number of points which bring together the two titles or variations of them. In 8:29 Peter affirms Jesus as ‘the Christ’ (meaning ‘the Anointed One’, the
Messiah). He is praised for the insight. It is a true perception. At once, however, when Jesus speaks of his future, he uses, not Messiah, but Son of Man, and he speaks of the necessary suffering which lies ahead. The title Son of Man, with its much more lowly connotations than Christ, Messiah, Son of God, is being used to interpret the others. When, at his trial, Jesus admits to being ‘the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One’, he goes on immediately to interpret that confession in terms of the future of ‘the Son of Man’. When seeking to make abundantly clear to his disciples where the way forward lay in the work of salvation he had come to achieve, Jesus uses Son of Man language to communicate it (10:45). At the centre of the gospel are the three prophetic statements about his death, each cast in terms of ‘Son of Man’.

To jump ahead once more, it is noteworthy that words about Jesus’ future are accompanied by sayings about the nature of discipleship in the kingdom. Again we are moving nearer to the central purpose of this gospel, ‘like master, like servant’.

We come across the same emphasis by yet another route when considering the use of kingdom of God in Mark. Jesus begins by announcing that the kingdom is drawing, or has already drawn, near. The strong implication is that it has drawn near in him. As the story unfolds it becomes even clearer that he is the focal point of that kingdom. His power over disease, nature and demons celebrates the kingdom. He even assures people of divine forgiveness, to the chagrin of the religious leaders (2:1–12). People who show interest in coming to terms with the kingdom of God receive instruction in how to follow Jesus. Perhaps one can put it most accurately by saying that if he is not the king of the kingdom, since God is, he is at least the model of kingship. People can see in him God’s way of being king.

If the disciples in any way perceived that, and Peter’s affirmation at Caesarea Philippi suggests that they might have done so, then we can understand their horror, expressed in Peter’s words straight after his testimony to Jesus, at the thought of Jesus going to death in Jerusalem at the hands of others. His picture of the future did not coincide with theirs, even though he affirmed their view of him as the Christ, the Son of God. It was not that the titles were wrong. He was warning them against the accretions of centuries, whereby the Messiah was seen in terms of the model of kingship developed by earthly kings.

Jesus allowed the use of the traditional titles, but recast their meaning through his own way of being king — certainly being in control and seeing to the heart of things, but also showing lowly submission to his Father, and eventually suffering so that the kingdom might be truly established in the lives of men and women.

We are right, therefore, to see the person and work of Jesus as a focal point of Mark’s account. But we should also notice that as the gospel progresses the picture of Jesus changes from the all-powerful conquering centre of divine energy, to the lowly, unresistant, suffering one. What his followers, and the crowds, and his opponents found difficult to see, to which Mark wishes to draw his readers’ attention, is that this also was a release of divine energy, far more significant than the power strategy which had preceded it, necessary though it was. We may have to confess that we, too, have
difficulty with that, a point of great importance if discipleship means following our Maker.

We have now looked at one of the main strands of Mark’s account namely, who Jesus is. We have seen that this theme changes across the length of the gospel in two ways. ‘Who Jesus is’ moves from an emphasis on a miracle worker to lowly dying servant, though without loss of authority. And ‘who Jesus is’ becomes, in the second half, the basis for concentrating on ‘what Jesus came to do’.

Each of these variations of the theme is vital for the other main emphasis to which we now turn. We have already identified it as how people should respond to Jesus.

Mark indicates Jesus’ stress on this element by recording his earliest exhortation. Because the kingdom of God is at hand, his hearers should ‘repent and believe the good news’ (1:15). Followed as it is by the series of miracles which Jesus performed, one would expect a welcome response to such an appeal, coming as it does from the person at the centre of the transformations taking place in people’s lives. Here too, however, as with the portrayal of the person of Jesus, so with the response people make, there is a development of theme into something different from the initial portrayal.

To the question, ‘How do people in Mark’s gospel show faith in Jesus?’, the answer, to put it bluntly, is that mostly they don’t! His family misunderstand and try to deflect him from his course. His own townspeople are almost jealous of him and certainly refuse to accept his claims. The religious leaders are at first cool and later directly antagonistic to the point of seeking his death. The crowd follows, enjoying the teaching and being amazed by it, but in the end they do nothing to save him. Even his disciples, and not least Peter, struggle to understand without ever properly doing so, and get things badly wrong. Some of the women are at least faithful as far as the crucifixion, but even their faith fails them at the very end.

Only two groups seem to give anywhere near the expected response — the desperate and the demoniacs. The latter at least show signs of knowing who Jesus is; but they get no further because recognition leads to resistance, not faith, till they are delivered. The desperate alone are seen to be faithful. They have nowhere else to go, and no future to hope for without a cure. In the main they cast themselves on Jesus and find all that they need, and more.

One explanation of this phenomenon of unbelief is the sinfulness of the human heart. Mark makes this plain by drawing particular attention to what it means to follow Jesus. It is likely, as some commentators suggest, that the pattern of concentrating half the gospel on miracles and the other half on the passion is deliberate. The pattern is presented to underline the fact that discipleship is not an unending experience of supernatural power revealed in miracles and powerful teaching. Discipleship is also about lowly, costly obedience to the will of God, in facing the sinfulness and evil of human nature in the world. The disciples particularly illustrate how difficult it is for human beings to accept that side of the life of faith. They seem to enjoy all the wonderful works, but they recoil at the talk of the cost. They argue about who will have the seats of honour, both his and theirs. Peter, whose testimony may well lie
behind much of what Mark writes, is a particular example both of the good intentions and of the dismal failure of those who were encountered by Jesus.

So one part of the mystery of unbelief is the power of sin in people’s lives. That is not the only, nor even the most important, reason for a lack of true discipleship in this gospel, however. There is a second development of the discipleship theme in Mark. Put simply, it is that the people in the story are not able to come to proper discipleship because they do not yet know the full story. They are faced by Jesus before his death and resurrection. If true discipleship is, as Jesus keeps on making clear, to carry our cross after him, and to discover God’s care for us as we do, then they are bound to be unable to perceive its total meaning before he dies and rises, though those who are desperate enough seem to make the breakthrough.

Evidence that this is part of the intention of the gospel is seen in the way that, from the very beginning, the shadow of the cross hangs over the story. Mark is not alone in describing the baptism of Jesus by John, with all its implications for our understanding of the death of Jesus for our sins. It signifies his association with our sins, since he had none of his own. But in Mark there is also the early saying about not fasting while the bridegroom is with you, but only when the bridegroom ‘is taken away’. Then there is the dramatic change in the middle of the gospel, marked by the repeated prophecy of death, with resurrection also promised. And half the gospel is given to the passion, including the resurrection. When one adds the way that Jesus speaks of discipleship as taking up one’s cross and following him, the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus as the model for discipleship becomes powerfully clear.

It is at this point that we can perceive part of the reason for seeing Mark’s gospel as owing something to the theology of Paul. The reality and power of sin in the world is a pillar of Paul’s teaching. So is the centrality of the death of Jesus as its solution. Above all, Paul sees the Christian life as a daily experience of dying and rising with Christ, which is symbolized in baptism. Mark benefitted from Paul as well as from Peter, another reason why this gospel is so basic to the faith of Christians.

From the various roads towards an understanding of the purpose of the Gospel of Mark we have now looked at Mark’s own declared intention. We have followed the presentation of the material and the way it develops. Attention has been given especially to major themes of the gospel: the identity of Jesus and the nature and demands of discipleship. The two have come together in the focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus as properly the climax of all that he came to do and as the secret of true discipleship. As we have covered this ground we have noticed the people in the story and the nature of their varied participation.

We may now ask about those for whom the Gospel of Mark was written. Here we are unavoidably faced with trying to discern from the text itself who they were and why they were the recipients.

Some outside evidence may be inferred from the content. Of the four suggested destinations (Egypt, Antioch, Galilee and Rome) the last would seem still to be the most likely. The people addressed include a majority of Gentiles, since Mark needs to
explain Jewish customs. Yet he is not apparently writing to a church torn by Jewish-Gentile power struggles within its life. The spread of the Gospel of Mark, and its use by other gospel writers, suggests that a reliable and strong church stood behind it. The obvious relevance to the ‘suffering’ element in discipleship hints at a place and time of recent or current persecution. Rome under Nero certainly provides just such a scenario, and is supported by the likelihood that the gospel was written after the death of the apostle Peter, and probably of Paul too. Some time after AD 64 is indicated, and before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 which is still in the future in the gospel, taking the prophetic element of the gospel seriously.

If Rome is the place then the readership is a varied group. The need for some exposition of suffering in the Christian life would be important. Was there also a tendency in such circumstances to want a particularly powerful form of Christianity in order to counter, at a supernatural level, the persecution being experienced at the natural level? Or was there a view of Jesus which so emphasized his divine nature and power that awareness of his humanity and understanding of human need was deficient? Were so many Christians wondering why, with a Saviour who was Son of God, they should be suffering at all? The answers cannot reach any degree of certainty, but somewhere in that set of suggestions there is probably a fair account of the questions being asked.

In response Mark assures them of a strong and lowly Jesus, whose very suffering became an avenue of salvation (a point powerfully made by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2:36–39).

The view of authorship taken here is that the writer was John Mark, to whom reference is found in Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37–39; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24. He was evidently close to Peter and, after an initial failure, travelled with Paul. His pedigree is therefore strong!

It is clear that Mark did not try to present a chronological biography of Jesus, as a modern historian might. He had at his disposal material from spoken and written sources, and personal testimony from the apostle Peter. All this he sifted and presented in a way which enabled him to communicate those things he felt called to make plain. Such a view of the origin of this gospel in no sense diminishes the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring this part of Holy Scripture. It adds to the sense of purpose behind the gospel, and it acknowledges the vital part of the author. It lifts us healthily clear of views of inspiration which require nothing of the author but the capacity to write words received from heaven. At the other end of the spectrum, it delivers us from views of Mark stringing together isolated segments of tradition with very little purpose other than to include as many as possible. Above all, it concentrates our attention on the text itself. There is a mystery about the divine inspiration of human effort, and we do well to acknowledge it and receive Holy Scripture as it is, from the hand of God through the minds of human beings committed to be channels of his will.

*How are we to receive and read* Mark’s gospel? Much in the cultural detail of the first century is strange to us. We need to work hard at understanding it and its significance for those described in the gospel, and for those to whom it first came. We must be
conscious, too, of the traditions and thought forms and experiences which shape our perceptions as we read the Bible. These also need to come under the judgment of God the Spirit as we read. But at depth, as the Spirit who inspires the writer inspires the reader, we may perceive fundamental themes which challenge us as directly as they did the earliest readers. Such topics as the nature of the kingdom of God and our part in it; the identity and authority of Jesus our Lord; the centrality of his death and resurrection; their implications for our discipleship; and our own vision of and commitment to mission — all these stand out as part of Mark’s contribution to our spirituality and service. His direct and deep engagement with them, and with us, can enrich us immensely.

(BST, The Message of Mark, Donald English, pp. 14–24)

In proclaiming the glad tidings, one should reexamine what is good news about our message concerning Jesus Christ. False gospels still abound. In the secular world, politicians promise, like the emperors of old, that happy days will be here again with their offer of a New Deal, a New Frontier, the Great Society, or a New World Order. Tyrants inaugurate such things as the Thousand-Year Reich and the Great Leap Forward, but life seems to remain pretty much the same. The oppressed remain oppressed, and the poor are still downtrodden. Hatred and prejudice are still at home in our communities. In the religious world, the good news about Jesus Christ is watered down to good advice. People are told to be kind, to smile a lot, to love all creatures, to think positively, and to feel good about themselves. But the true gospel about Jesus Christ is something far more radical and explosive. It has to do with God’s redemptive action in Jesus, which reveals God’s love for humans and judgment on human sin and satanic evil.

Albert Einstein once said, “I believe in Spinoza’s God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings.” The gospel proclaims, however, that God is involved with the very depths of human trouble and shame and allows the Son of God to be treated ingloriously on the cross to effect our redemption. It reveals that God comes to us in the din of huge crowds, soldiers shooting dice, and priests raging, and in the great darkness when the Son of God drinks the cup of suffering on a cross. In the crown of thorns and the shame of death, we can see the crown of majesty and the victory of God. The gospel also furnishes a new basis for our relationship to God and our relationship to each other. Our relationship to God is based on unmerited forgiveness. Even disobedient disciples, who abandon Jesus in Gethsemane, deny him with curses, and are muzzled by fear, find forgiveness and the chance to begin again through God’s power. Jesus’ death calls into being a new humanity based on faith in him, not on the biological limitations of clans and tribes. It creates a community based on compassion and a new inclusive sense of family.

The shock that the crucified Jesus is the Messiah, God’s Son, makes clear that God cannot and will not be confined by finite human expectations. This is the God who made the platypus, a mammal so unmammal-like that expert scientists declared it a hoax when it was first sent to the British Museum. The religious experts of Jesus’ day rejected him because he did not fit any preconceived notions of what the Jewish
Messiah would be or do. We today are little different from first-century Jews and the disciples in wanting a Messiah who does our bidding, wins our wars, destroys our enemies, and exalts us. Throughout Mark, the disciples display a delight in power, glorious achievements, and personal ambition; they want a Messiah who is above suffering and who will give them their heart’s desires. We too want a Messiah who graciously adapts his will to our desires and needs and is dedicated to serve us rather than all humankind. The Messiah we meet in Mark is a rude awakening to those who are more interested in themselves and in ensuring their personal salvation and entrance to eternal life (10:17) than in God or the fate of God’s world. Michael Card captures this reality in his lyrics to “Scandalon.”

Along the path of life there lies this stubborn Scandalon
And all who come this way must be offended
To some He is a barrier; to others He’s the way,
For all should know the scandal of believing.

As was the case during Jesus’ ministry, so today many will not believe or will try to mold Christ into their own images by telling him who he is and what he is to do. They want glamorous, gimmicky, short-term solutions to their own problems. Many try to domesticate the scandal, turn the cross into jewelry, and turn the Christ into a teacher of self-actualization. The Gospel of Mark is the antidote to this distortion as it presents the foundation story of the gospel about Jesus Christ, who suffers and dies on a cross.

(TNAC, Mark, David E. Garland, pp. 24–26)

The most unique and essential characteristic of Christianity is the Incarnation. Christianity teaches that Jesus Christ was the true God in truly human form, who gave his life as an effective sacrifice for the sins of the world and whose historical resurrection from the dead is an anticipation of the resurrection of those who trust in him. No other religion — ancient or modern, local or universal — makes anything approximating the claim that God, without sacrificing his divine nature, has become a full and complete human being. The Incarnation reverses the traffic pattern of all other religions: it is not we who, by morality or enlightenment or some other means, mount the ladder to heaven, but God who comes to us in our weakness and unworthiness. According to the New Testament, our knowledge of God is not derived from intermediaries, whether prophets, priests, visions, oracles, avatars, or spirit-persons, but immediately from Jesus Christ, who was not only sent by God but who was God. Christianity claims to rest on a personal self-disclosure of God in human form.

Because the Incarnation distinguishes Christianity distinctly from other religions, it opens Christianity to charges of supremacy in the modern mind. If Christianity is unique in the way described above, then it offers a personal revelation of God not offered in other religions. This claim is offensive in a world in which pluralism is highly valued. In an effort to lessen or alleviate the supposed exclusivity of Christianity and to enhance its compatibility with other religions, the uniqueness of Jesus is sometimes scaled down to the status of prophet or revealer, similar to Moses or Muhammad, Buddha or Black Elk. In an effort not to offend believers of other faiths, some Christians surrender that which is most distinctive about Christianity in order to identify with that which is most common in other religions. I have no doubt that most people who do this are motivated by good will,
hoping for what might be called benevolent universalism. The cost, however, jeopardizes the heart of the Christian faith. The quest for a lowest common denominator on which all religions can agree and perhaps eventually unite inevitably compromises the particularity of the Incarnation.

The goal of true interfaith dialogue is better understanding among religions, the dismantling of stereotypes, and the recognition of common ground and cooperation in endeavors. These goals seem to me entirely worthy — indeed I should say obligatory — of any Christian who claims to be motivated by the twin commitments to truth and love, as Paul enjoins all Christians to be in Ephesians 4:15. When a history of injustices and even crimes colors the dialogue, however, as is the case in Jewish-Christian dialogue, then rare qualities are required of participants on both sides of the table. Injustices must be named and confessed. Christians, in particular, must be willing to confess and repent of complicity in many forms of anti-Semitism in past generations. But they cannot be expected either to retract or repent of the essence of the gospel, and certainly not of their belief in the Incarnation. To expect that would be like expecting children to repent of being children because they behave selfishly or even cruelly. They may repent of their selfishness or their cruelty, but they cannot — indeed should not — repent of being children. Christianity, likewise, may repent of the evils done in the name of the faith, but to repent of the faith itself would be to perpetrate another injustice — against itself. (Is Jesus the Only Savior?, James R. Edwards, pp. 229–230)