

THE COST OF FOLLOWING JESUS (MARK 8:34-38): A CHALLENGE TO EFKS
PARISHIONERS AND THEIR COMMITMENT TO THE CHURCH.

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Dedication

*. I dedicate this piece of work to my Dad,
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May you rest in peace.

Abstract.

Jesus' Disciples are also called the followers of Jesus in our literal understanding from the Bible. But speaking to the twelve is the same words for the crowd or for everyone who lives for God rather from anything else. Markan Narrative in 8:34-38 re-organizes something unique for everyone to bear in mind about the life of a Christian. It needs to leave the past to forget but restart again with a new leaf of life in order to proclaim God's will. By this focus, there will be very easy to adapt our social way of life in the priority of Mark; to make ourselves clear in the quality of all our services to God they must be; in order to be like Jesus in His sacrificial enhancement for everyone to be saved.

Introduction

Over the years, the EFKS village churches have been largely dependent on their parishioners as the main source of fund not only for support, but also to meet the churches' needs in terms of donations and financial contributions. Today, this traditional way of supporting the church is still continuing and has become an established system in all EFKS parishes not only in Samoa, but also overseas countries like New Zealand, Australia, and others. Normally, parishioners labour themselves to get finance to support the church in its financial needs such as church offerings, donations, fundraisings and others.

Until today, this traditional way of supporting the church has been a controversial issue. Indeed, there are many church people out there, perhaps the majority are EFKS adherents, who are not happy with this EFKS traditional custom. They have been expressing their critical opinions and views against it. Some of them say it has been a burden and they cannot withstand it anymore. Consequently, they have turned themselves to other denominations for freedom. Some have been despair and decided to commit poorly by giving less for the church and its needs. Some have been complaining and have branded the church as a minister's bank or business.

In this paper, I have regarded all this controversial opinions against the church as parishioners' failure to commit themselves to their church obligations. Church offerings, donations, and fundraisings are not burdens but are commitments by which they should lose their lives for the church, according to Mark 8:34-38. It is a service and a way of discipleship. It is from this point of view of Mark 8:34-38 that I have reconsidered the EFKS parishioners and their responsibility to commit themselves to the church.

In chapter one, I have made an exegesis of Mark 8:34-38. I have demonstrated in the exegesis that Mark 8:34-38 was meant to encourage and challenge Mark's community of Christians in Rome when some of them failed to be faithful followers of Jesus.

In chapter two, I have related Mark 8:34-38 to my EFKS parish at my village of Aufaga. Specifically, it is the application of Mark 8:34-38 as a challenge to the failure of most parishioners to fully commit themselves to their church obligations as they should.

The last part of this paper is the conclusion where I have summarised all my views and arguments in this project.

Chapter One: Exegetical Analysis of Mark 8:34-38

1. Introduction

Mark 8:34-38 is a piece of rhetoric in Mark's narrative by which the crowd and the disciples have been challenged. As a piece of rhetoric itself, it connotes that through these words of Jesus (Mark 8:34-38), the author's purpose is to persuade¹ both the crowd and disciples into serious commitment to Jesus' way of life. Such is the purpose and aim of these exhortative words put on the mouth of Jesus by the author of the Gospel of Mark.²

In this first chapter, I shall exegete Mark 8:34-38 in the light of its purpose; that is, as a text that seeks to encourage the disciples. On the other hand, it is a text reflecting the author's need to encourage his fellow Christians to face persecution. Therefore, it is essential that we shall first discuss the suffering context of the Markan community in the first century AD. Knowing this context can help us understand better the meaning of Jesus' challenge in Mark 8:34-38.

2. The Suffering Of Mark's Community in Rome

2.1 Date and Setting

The Gospel of Mark has never been tied to one setting. In scholarship, there have been scholarly attempts to link the Gospel to several different settings including Rome, northern Galilee, southern Syria, and the Transjordan.³ But for my attempt to discuss the socio-historical context of Mark's community, I would just side with the opinion that Rome is the setting, and that I see the Gospel of Mark fitting the historical backdrop of the period 60-71 AD. Moreover, I am of Brian J Incigneri's view that the Gospel of Mark was possibly written a few months later in AD 71, after the immediate destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70.⁴

¹ Cf. Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001) 14, who says that Mark's rhetoric primarily seeks to persuade his audience. On the one hand is Christopher D. Marshall, *Faith As A Theme In Mark's Narrative* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989) 16, who says that Mark's rhetoric aims to produce the desired effect on the reader.

² Mark's use of rhetoric is significant, suggesting that he lived in a culture familiar with rhetoric. However, Mark's rhetoric is simple and of the basic level compared to Paul's complex macro level rhetoric of speech.

³ For the detailed scholarly discussions on these various settings, see Brian Beggs, *The Role Of The House Motif In The Gospel Of Mark* (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Australian Catholic University, 2005) 43-75.

⁴ See Brian J. Incigneri, *My God My God Why Have You Abandoned Me: The Setting And Rhetoric Of Mark's Gospel* (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Australian Catholic University, 2001) .

2.2 Hatred of Christians And Their Fear of Roman Persecution

According to the writings of Josephus, Christians not only feared Roman persecutions, but were also hated because of their foreign cult. This is evident in the case of Roman Christians, who were being exposed to such Roman hatred, and living in fear of martyrdom. Clear evidences for the persecution and hatred of the Christians in Rome are found in the Roman sources attributed to Roman writers such as Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, etc.⁵ Not only that the Christians were hated (cf. Mk 13:13), they were also a suspect for the many crimes committed in the empire during the early sixties. These years are said to have been marked with many conspiracies, and characterized by “suspicion, political intrigue, and murders”; and the Christians with their foreign cult were likely to be the cause. It was this Roman suspicion which led to their growing hatred of the Christians and their foreign cult in Rome.⁶ Moreover, there should be no reason to doubt that they were also sought out, arrested, and were likely to face harsh death penalties.

2.3 It Was Not Easy To Be Christian in Rome

While persecution indicates the tyranny of Rome, on the other side of the coin, it also suggests that being a Christian in a Roman region could not have been an easy commitment. To be sure, Christianity was an illegal religion in the Roman Empire since it was not given permission; anyone found to be associated with it would likely to face punishment or death. Tacitus in the *Annals* says that, all “those who confessed” (perhaps the name *Christos*) were apprehended, then a great number of which were convicted.⁷ In the Roman Empire, it is a norm that everyone will have to participate in worshipping the emperor, take part in “public ceremonies, and honoring the emperor”.⁸ Christians were always an obstacle and Rome’s hatred of them fall upon their unwillingness to participate in the pagan imperial activities.⁹ Being a Christian, as mentioned, is considered a crime and capital offence in the empire with fatal outcomes. In such context, it is evident that the extent of both insecurity and vulnerability of the

⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation. The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) 4.

⁶ Incigneri, *My God My God Why Have You Abandoned Me*, 159.

⁷ Ibid., 161.

⁸ James S. MacLaren, “Jews and the Imperial Cult: From Augustus to Domitian”, *JSNT* 27.3 (2005) 16-18.

⁹ Incigneri, *My God My God Why Have You Abandoned Me*, 162.

Christian communities in Rome were tremendous. Since they were branded as enemies of the state, legal actions would have to be taken, and death was likely to occur.

2.4 The Time of Nero

Nero's time seems to be especially dangerous and cruel. The events of his time were seen to be much more brutal as there was massive massacre of Christians during his reign.¹⁰ There were various ways of execution he commanded, many of which were reported by Tacitus to be taking place in public, and frequently as "shows in the amphitheatre". The public settings of these violent executions of Christians may well indicate that they were also meant for entertainingly pleasing Nero and his audience. There were other modes of execution inflicted upon criminals, which included "burning, crucifixion, and exposure to hungry wild dogs".¹¹ It is plausible that Nero might have been the first emperor to differentiate Christians from the Jews when the fire event occurred in AD 64. He exclusively blamed the Christians as scapegoats of the terrible fire, that made an extensively large damage on the city; and a massive number of Christians were killed as a result. According to Tacitus, there were hardly any Roman citizens found among these Christian executions.

2.5 Many Became Apostatised

The imperial executions became the terrifying memories to the Christian communities in Rome; for there is the conviction that they profoundly felt the trauma of persecution, consequently became apostatised, and cowardly renounced Christianity involvement. Indeed, many denied their Christian faith for fear of losing life,¹² permanently detaching them from this Christian family of brothers and sisters in Christ. Denying being a Christian and compromising with the Roman authorities were just some of the many diseases affecting Christian determination in enduring persecution. On one side of the problem, some Christians betrayed their other fellow Christians (cf. 13:12), by reporting them to the Roman authorities and a reward

¹⁰ Darrel Broking, "The Neronian Persecution" (Unpublished Manuscript, 2010) 2-3; C. J. Lyes, "From Republic to Empire: Rome's Persecution of the Christians" (Unpublished Manuscript, 1998) 1-5; Don Davidson, "Roman Persecution of Christianity" (Unpublished Manuscript, 2006) 4-5.

¹¹ Incigneri, *My God My God Why Have You Abandoned Me*, 179. He also states that execution by wild beasts is precedent as it also occurred in the time of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, and in the time of emperor Caligula (See n.30).

¹² Cf. Bas Van Iersel, "Failed Followers in Mark: Mark 13:12 as a Key For the Identification of the Intended Readers", *CBQ* 58 (1996) 245-249.

is said to be given to the reporter.¹³ On the contrary, Mark strongly opposes that kind of behaviour, in favour of faithfulness and perseverance. For one thing, Mark makes it clear that only “the one who perseveres to the end will be saved” (13:13), perhaps implicitly referring to the context of torture under the Roman authorities. In other words, Christians were at best expected to remain faithful as Christians when in trouble.

2.6 Inability To Stay Determined As A Christian

Fear occurred all of a sudden. It couldn't have been avoided, as it is a natural emotion with anyone. Hence many Christians just couldn't hold on to their Christian faith, and had to let go of it so as to escape the possibility of dying as a martyr.¹⁴ In the context where Christians are subject to intensive torture, this is of course the case. A Roman judge or torturer keeps on torturing a Christian adherent until a victim has finally agreed to give up with his or her endurance. Van Iersel says that torture led to the loss of body parts of the victim, concluding that such is the allusion of 9:43-48.¹⁵ This allusion makes sense if one also understands that Mark's Gospel seeks to encourage the Christians to endure the sufferings of their faith. Thus, although a Christian's eye and a hand have been removed as a result of torture, Mark through Jesus, says it is better to enter into (eternal) life and the kingdom of God with only one of both, but worse if thrown into hell with all of them. Worthy of note is the persuasive tone of the “*it is better...*” sentences (9:43b, 45b, 47b), that connotes how frustrated it was the inability of some to remain determined as Christians when in trouble. Indeed Mark saw and heard many of his community members gave up being Christians.

Thus, it is not surprising that Mark feels the need to encourage his community members out of all these frustrations, especially their fear of martyrdom. He wrote his story about Jesus, a martyr who faithfully endured his suffering to the end, as a paradigm for all Christians.¹⁶ Particularly, we shall also see in the exegesis that it is this purpose of encouragement why Mark had to challenge his community members through the words of Jesus in Mark 8:34-38. It is Mark's belief that, hearing Jesus' words will effectively change the situation of his readers.

¹³ Incigneri, *My God My God Why Have You Abandoned Me*, 173.

¹⁴ Cf. Megan McKenna, *On Your Mark: Reading Mark in the Shadow of the Cross* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2006) 58.

¹⁵ Van Iersel, “Failed Followers in Mark”, 253.

¹⁶ Incigneri, *My God My God Why Have You Abandoned Me*, 195-196; Cf. Kent Brower, “We Are Able: Cross-Bearing Discipleship and the Way of the Lord in Mark” (Unpublished Manuscript, 2007) 2, 9.

3. Exegesis: Relating Mark 8, 34-38 To The Suffering of Mark's Community

Suffering has a negative impact because it poses an atmosphere of long-term fear and despair in a community. When someone is fear of suffering, it is doubtless that he or she is also hopeless. It is believed that Mark's community members went through these same experiences. In this kind of situation, persuasion must go far deeper than the intellectual conviction. Mark 8:34-38 is a piece of Jesus discourse with that aim of persuasion: Mark uses it to build courage and hope among his community members, that not only the gospel is good to die for (cf.8:35), but God will also provide the strength needed to overcome that fear (13:12).

3.1 Self-denying And Cross Bearing (8:34)

Since Mark was disappointed to see his community members failed to be faithful followers of Jesus in the face of Roman persecution, he felt the need to challenge them with the words of Jesus: εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν, ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθείτω μοι (*If anyone wishes to follow after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*).¹⁷ What is important in the call is its tone of exhortation, intending an impact on those listening. Mark has been hopeful for this impact on the disappointed failures of his community. For this reason, he brings to their ears this challenging call from Jesus (8:34b).

But how can this happen? According to Jesus, it happens when one denies himself (ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν) and takes up his cross (ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ) for the sake of him and the gospel (8:35). Self-denial, as Skinner says, “obviously involves the relinquishment of an individual's autonomy, running counter to human habits of self-preservation and personal advancement.”¹⁸ In Mark's narrative, the verb ἀπαρνησάσθω (from ἀπαρνέομαι) is a reminder of Peter's denial of his master instead of himself. In this regard, it means to break up or to end a relationship with somebody (Jesus), because Peter was controlled by fear of his fate. So ἀπαρνησάσθω further implies a refusal “to be guided by one's own interests, to surrender control

¹⁷ The Greek sentence(s) here (and everywhere are) is cited from the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed.). Throughout this work the translations of Greek words and phrases to English are mine.

¹⁸ Matthew L. Skinner, “Denying Self, Bearing A Cross, And Following Jesus: Unpacking The Imperatives of Mark 8:34”, *Word And World* 23.3 (2003) 325. He compares his definition of self-denial to Mark 9:35 and 10:42-44. Furthermore, Skinner says that 8:34 is in no way a text that calls people “to seek out, rest content with, or glorify in abuse or victimization, as if this sort of suffering was a redemptive state”.

of one's own destiny".¹⁹ On the other hand, cross-bearing implicitly refers to a Christian's total readiness to die a martyr's death. This is implied in the use of the word σταυρος (cross). It reminds of "the condemned person carrying his cross to the place of execution".²⁰ The phrase ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ is not that Jesus encourages his followers to lose their life, but it's a hint that a Christian should prepare himself for the possibility of martyrdom.

Thus what Jesus calls for here is the radical abandonment of one's own identity and self-determination so that he or she is able to follow Jesus undeniably. Mark also wished that the same had happened to his community members, while writing this Gospel to them.

3.2 Lose Life For A Gain (8:35)

Mark's purpose to encourage continues on in this verse. But here it is the talk about "saving", "gaining" and "losing" one's ψυχή (life). Most importantly is Mark's clever use of ψυχή with the verbs σώσαι (to save), σώσει (he, she will save), and ἀπολέσει (he, she will lose), so as to convince his listening community. With these important words, more persuasive force has been added to the call (8:34a), posing more challenge to Mark's community.

Verse 35, as Edwards says, refers to the fact that "the one for whom the way of Jesus is more important than his own existence will secure his eternal being; but the one whose existence is more important than Jesus will lose both Jesus and his existence."²¹ In other words, for Mark, what a Christian needs to value and prioritise in his life is, living his Christian life to the fullest, which should include losing it for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. This, however, is not losing as a suffer loss; it is losing in exchange for life eternal²²: ὅς δ' ἂν ἀπολέσει τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ καὶ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου σώσει αὐτήν (but whoever will lose his life for the sake of the gospel will save it). Therefore a Christian in risk of losing life through persecution need not worry, for what he gains as a reward is eternal life²³. Furthermore σώσει and ἀπολέσει recall to

¹⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Cambridge: The Paternoster Press, 2002) 340.

²⁰ Graig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20, World Biblical Commentary* (Columbia: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2001) 25; Cf. Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001) 256.

²¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002) 257.

²² Cf. Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001) 245.

²³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Cambridge: The Paternoster Press, 2002) 340, calls this 'real life' which a Christian gains through losing life in martyrdom, and therefore is to be found beyond 'earthly life'.

mind the situation of Christians interrogated before the Roman authorities or court,²⁴ where many were incited to apostatise, deny association with Jesus, and eventually were freed to live: they apostatised so as to save their life from execution. But those who persevered and remained faithful to Jesus and the gospel, they were executed: they chose to remain as Christians before the Roman authorities and lost their lives, so as to have the gain of eternal life.

3.3 The Costliness Of Losing Life For Christ (8:36-37)

Mark's words of challenge go deeper in these verses. He feels the need to stress that following Jesus is indeed a very costly commitment. The extreme of which involves a loss of life (ψυχή). This loss is costly as it cannot be compared to a person winning the whole world and its treasures,²⁵ as is obvious in κερδῆσαι τὸν κόσμον ὅλον (to win *or* gain the whole world), which expresses "the height of human ambition and achievement, measured in terms of earthly life"²⁶. But this is the worldly gain which equals to a total loss of eternal ψυχή in the kingdom of God. On the one hand, why losing one's life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel is costly because it equals to a total profit of eternal ψυχή in the kingdom of God. Moreover, the costliness of such loss of ψυχή for Jesus, is further stressed in verse 37: τί γὰρ δοῖ ἄνθρωπος ἀντάλλαγμα τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ; (For what should anyone give in exchange of his life?). This question implies that this loss of life far surpasses any human value, and that "it is beyond price"²⁷, as it is the only way that a Christian can get his reward of eternal ψυχή.

This is a boost for Mark's community members who got lapsed into self-absorption and self-indulgence.²⁸ It was also possible that many of them were disregarding the Christian mission (16:15-16), and were falling complacently into the luxurious life of the Roman empire. In this case, there was also a need for Mark to rekindle their enthusiasm as bearers of the gospel and Jesus' name in the heathen Rome. Thus he felt it compulsive to reassure his community about the significance of such commitment for their Lord Jesus: It is costly, in the sense that nothing can exchange (ἀντάλλαγμα) for its priceless value. It is not surprising that the evangelist Matthew

²⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text With Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1974) 308.

²⁵ William Hendriksen, *Mark: New Testament Commentary* (Baker Books House Co.: Grand Rapids, 2004) 332.

²⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 341.

²⁷ Ibid, 341.

²⁸ Earl Richard, "Jesus, Mark, and the Mordern Reader" (Yamauchi Lecture: Loyola University, 2000) 6.

also has to convince his readers of the need to leave their shells of comfortable life in taking up the cross and follow Jesus (9:38-39).

3.4 The Son of Man Will Also Be Ashamed (8:38)

Mark has brought to the awareness of his community another challenge: that those ashamed of Jesus and his words in the world, indeed Jesus, as the Son of Man will also be ashamed of them when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. The language and tone of 8:38 reflect the eschatological reality of those who are ashamed (ἐπαισχυνθῆ) to be Jesus' followers, or in another sense, failed to insist on as faithful followers²⁹: Jesus will also be ashamed (ἐπαισχυνθήσεται) of them, perhaps referring to their rejection in the final judgement.

Possibly, from a Roman point of view, Christianity is a shameful religion because of its attraction to the Roman cross of crucifixion, which is a symbol of shame. This could be another reason why some outsiders always feel refused to be part of Mark's community, thus contending themselves with the lifestyle of the adulterous and sinful world (μοιχαλίδι καὶ ἁμαρτωλῷ), where honour is mostly admired and shame rejected.³⁰

However, this sort of lifestyle is neither a smart choice nor a good preference.³¹ Lust for it means one is ashamed of Jesus' way of life. In return, Jesus would not give any chance to anybody who is also ashamed of him and his teachings. This is why Evans says that "taking up the cross and following Jesus are not only wise, but also appropriate in view of the coming judgement."³² This judgement is implicit in the words: ἔλθῃ ἐν τῇ δόξῃ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν ἀγγέλων τῶν ἁγίων (he should come in the glory of his Father with the holy angels). It is in this judgement where all Christians or followers must answer, before Jesus the Son of Man, "for their loyalty or cowardice."³³ As for Mark's community, it is now a wise choice to be a follower

²⁹Leander E. Keck, "Mark" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol.3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 627; George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of Olivet Discourses* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993) 62-63; Graig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, WBC, 27; C. S. Mann, "Mark" in *The Anchor Bible* (NY: Doubleday, 1986) 352-353.

³⁰For the concepts of 'honour' and 'shame', see Mark MacVann, "The Passion of John the Baptist and Jesus Before Pilate: Mark's Warnings About Kings and Governors, *BTB* 38 (2008) 153. Also refer to, K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* (New York: Peabody, 1997) 56-58.

³¹Cf. Don Garlington, "Who Did Jesus Think He Was", *QJCL*, 8 (1999) 48.

³²Graig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, WBC, 27. Also see Leander E. Keck, "Mark" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 627 who not only sees Mark 8:38 as a "judgement saying", but also says that it refers to the final judgement and the parousia.

³³R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 342.

Jesus. It is also an honour to lose their lives for his sake, for in return, Jesus will also honour them in the final judgement. These promises or rewards, as we have said already, are meant to encourage Mark's community in their commitment as Christians who have chosen to faithfully bear the flag of Jesus' name in Rome despite their exposure to persecution.

4. More Expectations Of A Christian As Exemplified In Mark's Narrative

In our previous discussions, we learned of Mark's disappointment to see so many adherents of his Christian communities in Rome fallen into the pits of fear of martyrdom, doubt, apostasy, hopelessness, discouragement, and betrayal for a reward, etc. Also noted was Mark's attempt to reawaken hope and enthusiasm in this frustrating situation, by challenging those Christian communities with the words of Jesus in Mark 8:34-38. In our attempt to analyse this exhortative call of Jesus, we also have noted from that analysis that, Mark 8:34-38 has posed some valuable challenges for Mark's community: What is a Christian? What kind of person a Christian should be according to the challenge of Mark 8:34-38?

Basically, once a person becomes a Christian or a disciple, it is necessary for that person to deny himself, that is: to repudiate his or her life of materialism (cf. 10:28-31). Repudiation in this sense, means a total detach or disassociation from that way of life in favor of the spiritual life. For Mark, repudiation of one's life of materialism is what characterizes a true faithful Christian and a disciple. It is a clear sign of one's true commitment and a life fully devoted for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. In addition, it is the imagery of a Christian who is loyal, zealous, and truly committed to bearing the name of Jesus in a heathen environment, like Rome, and being ready to accept whatever risk and danger it may take. The extreme of which is losing one's life.

All these expectations of a Christian are being taken up and developed throughout Mark's narrative. The first scene after Jesus announces the Kingdom of God (1:14-15) is one, in which two pairs of brothers face the choice of following Jesus, or remaining with their family or livelihood (1:16-20). Then at both 1:18 and 1:20, we are told that the brothers left all their properties, families, and business so that to accept Jesus' call of discipleship.³⁴ This imagery of leaving everything reminds the reader of the fact that one has to deny his association with

³⁴ An echo of 1:18, 20 occurs again in 10:28-30 as a way of re-emphasising the importance of the sacrifice made earlier in the narrative by the two pairs of brothers in favour of following Jesus.

materialism for the painful choice of following Jesus (cf. 3:31-35). This is the problem with the rich young man who couldn't follow Jesus on account of his wealth and possessions (10:17-22). The man asked Jesus what should be done so as to inherit eternal life. In return, Jesus replied that he sell all his possessions, then come and follow him. Nevertheless, the story underlines for the reader how obstructive it was the man's wealth in his probable willingness to follow Jesus.

Another text worthy of note is 4:16-19, a section belongs to the Parable of the Sower (4:1-9), in which Jesus clearly identifies two types of seeds: i) the seeds fallen on the rocky ground, and ii) the ones fallen among the thorns; then Jesus tells immediately what their outcomes will be. After all, it is clear in these verses that a Christian is being warned of unfaithfulness when it comes to persecution, as well as his or her desire for materialism. In other words, Mark's expectation in 4:16-19 is that, a Christian or a disciple should always stay faithful at the risk of his or her life. In addition, a life of spirituality should always be of utmost importance. Matthew says that, one "cannot serve God and wealth" at one time (6:24c).

Moreover, the story of the poor widow's offering (12:41-44) also expects that a Christian or a disciple should fully poured out his or her life in following Jesus. In the story, Jesus expects that his disciples should also do likewise, when he called out for their attention to what she did (12:43-44). Note that the woman is poverty-stricken: the two small coppers that she put in were all that she got, but she was more than willing to offer them all, hence making her poverty worse. It is probable that she was starving and on the brink of dying. What is worthy of note is the fact that she gave all "out of her poverty," being contrasted with the rich who gave out of their wealth. In other words, a Christian or disciple shall not save a bit of his or her life (8:35a), but to outpour all of it in following Jesus.

Mostly expected throughout Mark's narrative, a Christian or disciple is urged not to fear of any danger (persecution) but trust in the Lord Jesus. When the storm of 4:35-41 raged around the disciples while Jesus was still sleeping, they cried out, "Teacher, do you not care that we are being destroyed?" (4:38).³⁵ This is really the cry of fear and not trusting that Jesus has power to save (cf. 13:11). Through Jesus, Mark answers back to the disciples, tying trust and fear together: "And he said to them, 'Why are you being cowardly? Do you not trust yet?'" (4:40).³⁶ From this

³⁵ The phrase "we are perishing" in the NRSV is too weak here. This is because the disciples do not just believe that they are about to die, but that storm is destroying them.

³⁶ The NRSV English translation has got "Have you still no faith?" However I opt for "trust" to translate πιστις rather than "faith," as it better signifies the personal confidence in God urged by this Gospel.

moment, the disciples' fear keeps increasing, and they will even become more frightened, showing a growing lack of trust in Jesus (9:32). In 10:32, the disciples are said to be "shocked" and "fear" while heading up to Jerusalem with Jesus, knowing that they will be faced with opposition there. In the story, Jesus is perhaps determinedly walking towards the capital, but lying behind the story scenes of frightened disciples, is the sense of frightened followers not feel determined facing the rulers who "lord it over them" (10:42). The disciples' fear reaches a climax when all of them deserted and fled Jesus (14:50), leaving him alone in his fate. However, fear continues to be seen in Peter's keeping him away from Jesus' trial and denying knowledge of him, and is implied in the absence of the Twelve from his crucifixion, as well as in the women watching from a distance (14:66-72). Fear in Mark's community is clearly such a problem that Mark tries to deal with by encouraging them with the story of Jesus' suffering.

Chapter Two: Relating Mark 8:34-38 to the EFKS Parish of Aufaga

1. Introduction

In this last chapter I shall make an effort to relate Mark 8:34-38 to a Samoan context. I have decided therefore to use my own EFKS³⁷ church at my village of Aufaga to which I shall link Mark 8:34-38. More specifically, I shall try to employ Mark 8:34-38 as both a perspective and challenge to my own congregation's life of service and participation in various church obligations such as projects, financial offerings and contributions, fundraisings, etc. This means looking from Mark 8:34-38, parishioners should painfully commit to these practices and activities as a way of losing their lives for the church and Jesus Christ. In this regard, parishioners are no different from Jesus' followers who committed themselves in martyrdom. In other words, parishioners' mode of martyrdom today is sacrificing their lives in serving the church, a church responsibility that should be done with much enthusiasm. It is from this point of view, I shall discuss, that parishioners today should see how they commit themselves to their church obligations. Importantly, I shall first start with my church's brief historical background and development over the years.

2. A Brief History And Background Of EFKS Church Aufaga

2.1 Origin and beginning

On the 30th of August 1840, the Samoan missionaries established the first ever EFKS church in the village of Aufaga.³⁸ According to Tavila, a group of Aufaga villagers stopped a group of missionaries going towards Safata after returning from Aleipata; the missionaries had been searching for a good place on the eastern side of Upolu island to build a church for the districts of Aleipata, Falealili and Safata.³⁹ The Aufaga villagers who stopped them demanded that the missionaries should rest a few days in Aufaga before proceeding with their search of a good place to build a church. All of a sudden, Tupuola Mate, a paramount chief in Aufaga,

³⁷ EFKS abbreviation stands for Ekalesia Faapotopotoga Kerisiano i Samoa (Congregational Christian Church of Samoa).

³⁸ *O Le Faavae O Le Galuega* 1980-2011 (The Foundation Of The Church and Ministry). The book is a record of all the accounts about the developments and activities of EFKS Aufaga through the years. Unfortunately, it does not contain any records of the church in the earliest years. It was not until the year 1980 that Rev. Pati Lemalu, an ordained minister of the church then, began to write down accounts concerning the church's activities and developments from 1980 until now, where Rev. Malo Afia has carried on with this responsibility.

³⁹ Fiamē Tavila, Personal Interview (Aufaga, Samoa: 18 August, 2011).

requested on behalf of the villagers the church to be built in Aufaga. To his request and aspiration of the villagers, the missionaries agreed and the work began on the 30th of August in 1840.⁴⁰ The first minister of the church immediately after completing the work was a missionary by the name of Apati. Moreover, he was the first ever ordained EFKS church minister on the eastern side of the island of Upolu.

2.2 Growth and development

The church grew and multiplied increasingly over the years since its establishment. It was not a rapid growth but a gradual one shown in the slight increase of the total number of families in the church within every four to five years. In the beginning, the church started with only fifteen families, and by the year 1980 it developed to a total number of twenty four families; and around the year 2000 it increased to a total number of forty five families.⁴¹ From then until now, the total number has gone down to thirty five families. The drop is due to other member families being converted to other growing denominations in the village such as the Mormon, Assembly of God, and the Seventh Day Adventists.⁴²

3. The Slack Commitment Of Parishioners

The EFKS church of Aufaga does not have as many *matafale*⁴³ (family unit[s]) as compared to other fairly big EFKS churches in Samoa. As previously mentioned, the church has got only thirty five *matafale*, meaning it is also average in terms of prosperity. Of this total number of *matafale*, only a few are prosperous, then the average ones who are fairly a lot, and the rest are the majority who most of the times struggle.

As with most EFKS churches, our church also does things such as *taulaga* (financial offerings), *lafoga* (donations), *alofa o le faifeau* (gift of money for the pastor), and *suegatupe* (fundraisings for church projects). As usual, every *matafale* participates in these church practices by donating each category a certain amount of money. In reference to *taulaga*, there are two of

⁴⁰ Ibid, 18 August, 2011.

⁴¹ *O Le Faavae O Le Galuega* 1980-2011.

⁴² Ibid. Mormon was the first to establish itself in the village after forty five years since the establishment of the EFKS parish in 1840. It was not long after the establishment of the Mormon church that other non-mainline churches began to emerge around the village areas. Thus an official order from the chiefs' council was issued to the villagers not to allow any more non-mainline churches into the village.

⁴³ This word can be singular or plural throughout this last chapter.

them known as the *Taulaga o le Talalelei* as well as *Taulaga Samoa*, where each is donated once a year. As for the *alofa o le faifeau*, it is a frequent practice throughout the year donated in every fortnight a month, where each *matafale* donates out of their own freewill. The same applies to the *lafoga*, where every *matai* (chief) of every *matafale* is expected to donate of at least ten dollars or more for the *atina'e* or the development of the church.

Looking from Mark 8:34-38, church practices such as *taulaga*, *lafoga* or *alofa o le faifeau* are what parishioners should do at the best of their commitment. Parishioners should commit to these practices as if they are martyrs who have been longing to die for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. In the case of my church people, however, it is sad seeing some of them in poor commitment to these church stuff, prioritising their personal satisfaction, and giving little for the church *taulaga* and *alofa o le faifeau*. Sialatu criticized this during an interview,

“I think it is unrighteous and ridiculous if a person donates less for the church,...The whole week they go to gambling, nightclubs, and do other personal things...and when it's the church's turn they give only what was left in their pockets, this is not good!...Those people with such kind of attitudes are the ones who always complain when its time to donate for the church. As for me and my family we will keep donating the best for the church...”⁴⁴ [my translation]

Sialatu's comment also suggests that it is dishonest to give a little for the church when during the whole week a person has been spending much of his income unnecessarily. Moreover, it is a matter of failure to prioritise what should be first, therefore one ends up making a wrong priority. Parishioners should think that through the church practices, they are presenting a service to God.

According to Tulua, a widow of eighty five years of age, there are no limits to a person's ambition to give for the church if he or she believes that God will continue to replace all the treasures that have been offered for the church.⁴⁵ For her, it is important that everyone should believe that God will never get parched, because he is the source of fortunes and blessings for humankind. Otherwise, poor commitment will continue to exist and the parishioners will keep grumbling for too much of church donations as what Kovati feels,

“The thing that is happening to me is that my interest in serving the church is lost because I spend a lot for the church every week instead of my family. For me, going only to church services is good, but as for *taulaga* and *lafoga*, they demand more from the church people. It would be good if these church donations happen once within every two or three years, but since they are to be donated annually and frequently, it is really a heavy burden on me...I want to take a break from all these church stuff and relax for

⁴⁴ Fiatagata Sialatu, Personal Interview (Aufaga, Samoa: 17 August, 2011). The same view was also expressed by Tauta Lilo (Personal Interview), who also believes that the church should be a parishioner's first priority, where commitment to its practices is an integral part of one's life as a churchgoer.

⁴⁵ Pulefaasoa Tulua, Personal Interview (Aufaga, Samoa: 10 August, 2011).

just a moment, then I will commit to them again, when I am tempted to...”⁴⁶ [my translation]

Kovati’s comment mirrors how some *matafale* of our church also feel about the strong pressure of church donations, especially that this is just too much for them as they only earn an average income within two weeks. Masina commented as a representative,

“It is the church stuff that are making me working for income, and sometimes I have to budget my income for the sake of the church, not saving it for doing anything of my own personal interests.”⁴⁷ [my translation]

To some extent, Kovati’s and Masina’s comments are right and correct. But in some senses, their comments reflect their weakness and failure as parishioners. In fact, a parishioner not only goes to church but also believes that it is his or her responsibility to fully commit to church practices and activities. If Kovati and Masina had been thinking of this and why they go to church, they would not have had critical views.

Sometimes, when some *matafale* can no longer cope with the financial pressure of offerings and donations, they decide its time to leave the EFKS church for other non-EFKS churches.⁴⁸ As I have mentioned earlier, there was a decline in the total number of *matafale* from forty five to thirty five within the last past fifteen years. The majority of the ten *matafale* that we lost have turned themselves to the Mormon church, and a few of them to other churches. Nonetheless, the loss of these *matafale* denotes the situation of despair and desperateness in some *matafale* who failed to serve the church in the way it should be. Indeed, they don’t like the EFKS way of church commitment because it drains away their treasures. As Mark 8:34-38 expected that a Christian should lose his life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel through martyrdom, today it means a churchgoer is to lose his or her life for Jesus in commitment to church obligations and responsibilities.

So far the biggest weakness I have seen with most of my church is insincere commitment. This is to say that although they are committed to the church, actually it’s a commitment that doesn’t come out of a pure heart and genuine generosity. Moreover, it is a commitment and service to the church that are done with anger or unhappiness, even complaining. The *faiifeau* himself may not know this but these are the hot issues in conversations among our parishioners

⁴⁶ Moa Kovati, Personal Interview (Aufaga, Samoa: 13 August, 2011). The same personal opinion is also expressed by a few other interviewees to whom the question on what they feel about exposing to many church donations and financial contributions. But Kovati’s opinion here is representative of those who also feel in the same manner about the church donations and financial contributions.

⁴⁷ Tago Masina, Personal Interview (Aufaga, Samoa: 22 August, 2011).

⁴⁸ Rev. Malo Afia, Personal Interview (Aufaga, Samoa: 18 August, 2011).

in their own free time. When I put forward a question to Savusa this is what she knows and experiences,

“What I know is that there is still commitment to church donations and activities but people are not in the mood. This is because they know that it is always them who are at the expense of all donations and fundraisings. Even when there are church projects such as building a new church, a new hall, or the pastor’s residence, us the church people are the ones who have to go out there and hunt for money to implement these projects...”⁴⁹
[my translation]

Parishioners may well think that it is always them who are being exploited by the church in its projects and activities, where each *matafale* will have to commit by making massive donations, and sometimes organise fundraisings such as bingo, food stalls, raffles, etc. to get fund to implement the church’s projects.⁵⁰ This means, parishioners see themselves as always the shoulders upon which the heavy load and yoke of the fundraisings are to fall. It is not surprising that they always complain when all the church stuff come together at one time. Sometimes there is anger and people accuse the church and *faiifeau* to be the cause of poverty among some families.⁵¹ They interpret that the church is a *faiifeau*’s business and *matafale* are his customers from whom he gets huge income by working only on one day a week.

Overall, the highlight of the discussion so far is the fact that there is a huge failure of some people out there to suffer for the church. The best and quality of commitment are what is lacking in some people’s participation in the church. In some cases, there is a neglect of the church and its needs because some parishioners prioritise their own lives over the church. There are also complaints concerning the church’s financial pressure due to some earning small incomes although this can be an excuse. Some people have decided to leave for other denominations because they find our church exploiting. From the point of view of Mark 8:34-38, poor commitment is a defeat and failure of a parishioner in his role of serving the church the way it should.

⁴⁹ Suivai Savusa, Personal Interview (Aufaga, Samoa: 22 August, 2011).

⁵⁰ Ula Samuelu, Personal Interview (Aufaga, Samoa: 11 August, 2011).

⁵¹ See many criticisms against the EFKS churches on the Samoa Observer website for public opinions on a chosen issue, http://www.samoaoobserver.ws/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9147%3Achurchs-role&Itemid=87

4. Looking From Mark 8:34-38

In this section, I shall now use Mark 8:34-38 as both a perspective and challenge to my parishioners, especially their commitment to church obligations. This means, Mark 8:34-38 is a reconsideration of a parishioner, and his commitment to the church: It is a costly commitment (cf. Mark 8:36-37), it is a way of pouring out a parishioner's life for the church.

On the other hand, Mark 8:34-38 is a challenge that parishioners should know that the integral part of their churchgoing life is commitment to the church practices and activities. This commitment, is a way of discipleship and following Jesus' footpath of suffering. Therefore I shall first reconsider what a parishioner is according to Mark 8:34-38.

4.1 A 'parishioner' from the perspective of Mark 8:34-38

It is my insisting conviction that a 'parishioner' or 'churchgoer' is no different from a disciple or a follower of Jesus. During the first century AD, a disciple or a follower of Jesus would have to lose his life through martyrdom (Mark 8:35b),⁵² whereas nowadays a parishioner loses his or her life in commitment to the church.⁵³ Although there is a difference in time, context, and ways of following Jesus, a parishioner is a counterpart of a disciple back in the time of Jesus. A parishioner's commitment to the church is a form of discipleship because it is a commitment done for the sake of Jesus. It is a way of denying oneself in order to follow Jesus.

For one thing, what is strongly encouraged for both of Mark's community and Jesus' disciples in Mark 8:34-38, the same is also true and applies in the case of parishioners. Therefore parishioners should be of the level of utmost commitment as Mark 8:34-38 also expected of Jesus' disciples. They should deny themselves, take up their cross, and make the best of their commitment for the church. This means, parishioners do not have their own pathways to walk, or even guidelines to guide their actions and performance in the church. Rather, their commitment to the church should resemble that of disciples in the time of Jesus.

⁵² See previous discussions in chapter 1.

⁵³ For the context of losing life for the church, I don't have in mind here the meaning of the word ἀπολέσει (to kill, to perish, or to lose) as is meant in verse 35 of Mark 8, rather it is the sense of giving or sacrificing one's life and treasures for the betterment of the church.

4.2 Implications of Mark 8:34-38 for parishioners today

I think that the value and importance of Jesus words in Mark 8:34-38 still continues today, especially when we take those words as both a perspective and challenge to our difficulties and commitments in our own time.

Therefore there is a need for parishioners to reconsider how important they are as well as their commitment to the church. Their big failure to commit to the church is akin to the failure of Mark's community to commit in following Jesus. Mark expected that his community members should remain as committed faithful followers of Jesus in the face of Roman persecution. For the parishioners today, it means they should suffer themselves for the church in the best of their ability. Parishioners should sacrifice themselves for the church in total enthusiasm and loyalty.

When Mark encourages that a Christian should lose his life (Mark 8:34b-35) for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, the same also applies today for parishioners in their commitment to church practices and activities. According to Rev. Malo Afia, parishioners' commitment to the church is a Samoan way of discipleship or serving God, compared to Christian discipleship in Jesus' time where a Christian ended up losing life as a martyr.⁵⁴ Today, especially in Samoa, there are no persecutions where one loses his life, but the church is where the parishioners should lose their lives. From a Samoan point of view, parishioners should know that their commitment to the church is a form of a *tautua* (service). It is a *tautua* where a servant is required to serve his master at his utmost ability. It is also a *tautua* where a servant should suffer himself for the benefit of his master. This means the servant's first priority is his master. Therefore, it is also the similar perspective from which parishioners should see themselves and how they commit themselves in serving the church.

Furthermore, from the perspective of Mark 8:34-38, it is also important that parishioners should see their commitment to the church in the sense of *tautua lotu* (to serve the church). In the sense of the word, it requires that a parishioner's responsibility is the church. This means that parishioners should understand that they are *vae ma lima* (feet and fingers)⁵⁵ of the church. They are the ones that should be at the expense of every activity and project in the church, whether it be fundraisings or donations or whatever. A parishioner is always the one on whom the church depends for its development or success. In this case, the church is where a parishioner belongs

⁵⁴ Rev. Malo Afia, Personal Interview (Aufaga, Samoa: 18 August, 2011).

⁵⁵ *Vae* (feet) and *lima* (fingers) here refer to the parishioners as those responsible for serving the church, and upon whom the church largely depends in terms of its works and activities.

and it is his role to do what is good for the church. Therefore there should be no failure or despair, or blaming the church for the financial pressures. Parishioners should also be reminded of the story of the widow's offering in Mark 11:41-44, that it was all that she had that she offered to the treasury. Likewise, parishioners should sacrifice their lives for the church.

Conclusion

The Bible is an inspired word of God. As Christians, we always resort to it for some inspired thoughts not only to guide our actions and thinking, but also to challenge us to confront difficulties and impossibilities in our everyday life. Moreover, it encourages us Christians in a way that pushes ourselves beyond boundaries of failure, so that we may be able to rise victoriously over the many dilemmas of life.

The same challenge emanates from Mark 8:34-38. Mark feels the need to resort to these words of Jesus in an attempt to instil courage and focus into his readers so that they may be encouraged to endure the difficulties of their own milieu. Back in the first century AD, it was a need for them to commit faithfully in following Jesus, the extreme of which is losing their lives by way of martyrdom, as is clearly indicated in verses 34-35. Now the question is how can we as Christians realise the challenge of Mark 8:34-38 today in Samoa?

The answer to this question is the discussion in chapter two. I have argued that the church is where a Samoan parishioner should realise the challenge of Mark 8:34-38 for today. Parishioners should fully commit themselves to the church and its needs. The integral part of their church life is their committed participation in the church obligations such as *taulaga*, *lafoga*, *su'egatupe* and more. Parishioners should commit to these church stuff at the best of their effort and utmost ability as a way of *tautua* or losing life for the church. In simple words, it means parishioners' responsibility is the church. Instead of his family or personal interests his priority should be the church.

Last but not least, does losing life for the church mean, we give all for the church and nothing to live on? In fact, it is not this sense that these words are meant. Implicitly, losing one's life for the church means, a parishioner should serve the church in all his honesty and enthusiasm. It is a *tautua* in the Samoan sense of the word, which means parishioners should suffer themselves for the sake of the church. What is suffering? Simply, it is not giving what has been left in the pocket after spending all of the income in the pubs and nightclubs. Unless one has to suffer himself, he or she will not see God's blessings beyond the boundaries of suffering. This is realised in the Samoan saying, *O le ala i le pule o le tautua* (One's way to success is through service). Likewise, Jesus was exalted in glory because he suffered himself on the cross.

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