

Loving our neighbours as ourselves:  
towards a radical discipleship  
hermeneutic.  
Mark 12:28–34

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## Summary

There have been radical Christian disciples since the time of Jesus. Radical disciples, living in different contexts with their own issues, prioritise being faithful to Jesus as the revelation of God through lifestyle choices as well as spiritual practices. Radical disciples seek to be practical and true to the biblical texts, which often results in priorities that are counter-cultural and disturbing to the complacent, and they seek justice, particularly for the marginalised and oppressed. Radical disciples take on the roles of both disciple and prophet, and Jesus is central to all they do. Because exegetical and hermeneutical methods as well as the contribution of ideological perspectives are important to radical disciples both in interpreting biblical texts and in shaping the understanding of Jesus' priorities, radical discipleship requires its own hermeneutic.

The Gospel of Mark is recognised by scholars as particularly relevant to discipleship. In Mark 12:28-34, Jesus is shown to articulate his priorities in a two-fold way: love of God, love of neighbour. This is known as the 'Greatest Commandment', and is a particularly relevant passage to analyse using a radical discipleship approach. The questions which this thesis addresses are, What are the key characteristics of a radical discipleship hermeneutic? What further insights does a radical discipleship hermeneutic bring to the interpretation of Mark 12:28-34? A short case study is then introduced which explores how a radical discipleship approach is currently being embodied in the movement called Love Makes a Way.

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed.....

Date.....

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Tell me how much you know of the sufferings of your fellow men (sic) and I will tell you how much you have loved them.

Helmut Thielicke, quoted in *Experimental Theology Blog*,  
<http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com.au/2016/03/empathy.html>

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Experts tell us that the world is less violent than it was, citing statistics relating to “war deaths, family violence, racism, rape, murder and all sorts of mayhem”.<sup>1</sup> But we know that millions of people have been displaced by violence, and millions more will be displaced by climate change. The consequences of colonisation, the “war on drugs”, the “war on terrorism”, overt and covert racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, are still suffered by millions. Nations, particularly the empire of our times, the United States of America, still engage in violent activities to protect their geopolitical interests. There are very large numbers of people in modern-day slavery. The Global Slavery Index states that in 2014 38.5 million people were enslaved worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

The Uniting Church in Australia has produced a document entitled “An Economy of Life” which addresses structural disadvantage in economic, social and political areas. This document states:

Over the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, we have had to come to terms with the knowledge that this current global economic agenda, what is often referred to as neoliberal/neo-classical or (radical) free-market economics is failing to achieve prosperity for all, is causing violence and destruction to people and the planet and is entirely unsustainable in its current form.<sup>3</sup>

Within countries, there is structural discrimination which promotes the interests of the powerful and wealthy over the interests of the less well off, the sick, those with disabilities and those without paid employment. For example, it is known

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011); Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Hope for Children Organisation, “The Global Slavery Index 2014” (Australia: Walk Free Foundation, 2014). <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/download/>

<sup>3</sup> Uniting Justice Australia, “An Economy of Life: Re-Imagining Human Progress for a Flourishing World”, 2009, <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/just-and-sustainable-economy/uca-statements/item/461-an-economy-of-life-re-imagining-human-progress-for-a-flourishing-world>.

that the social determinants of health result in unfair and avoidable differences in health status both within and between countries. People who live in higher socio-economic areas are healthier and live longer, sometimes many years longer, than those who live in lower socio-economic areas, even when healthcare is available and accessible for all people in the society.<sup>4</sup>

In Australia, as well as these issues, there are policies concerning asylum seekers and refugees, First Peoples and climate change which are damaging people. These policies are adversely affecting how many Australians feel about their nation and themselves, and the reputation of the nation around the world. Our former Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, a Roman Catholic Christian, has recently spoken about taking too seriously the instruction from Jesus concerning loving our neighbour. This, according to Abbott, could possibly lead to fundamental change to the European Union and to nations like Australia.<sup>5</sup> His comments have drawn criticism from the church,<sup>6</sup> but some government ministers who are also Christians support such sentiments and policies which contradict the explicit teachings of Jesus. Most Christians understand the separation of church and state; what worries some Christians concerning these politicians is the hypocrisy of those who openly profess their Christianity yet do not practise it.

For followers of Jesus, particularly those who seek to live out their discipleship in a radical way, these issues are very troubling. I include myself in this group. For others, they do not raise concerns. But for those who are troubled, there are questions. Should we do something? If so, what should we do? What can we, as followers of Jesus, do, and remain true to his teaching?

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<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization, "The Social Determinants of Health," accessed April 28, 2016, [http://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/sdh\\_definition/en/](http://www.who.int/social_determinants/sdh_definition/en/).

<sup>5</sup> Tony Abbott, "Transcript: Tony Abbott's Controversial Speech at the Margaret Thatcher Lecture," *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 28, 2015, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/transcript-tony-abbotts-controversial-speech-at-the-margaret-thatcher-lecture-20151028-gkkg6p.html>; Tony Abbott, "The Margaret Thatcher Centre Second Annual Lecture," (paper presented in London, October 27, 2015), accessed October 28, 2015, <https://www.thatchercentre.com/events/annual-lecture/ii/>.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Duncan, "Mr Abbott Unveiled," *Social Policy Connections*, November 5, 2015, <http://www.socialpolicyconnections.com.au/?p=9526>.



Over centuries of Christian scholarship, church involvement in politics and wars, traditions and doctrines have developed which accommodate Christian life and practices to the interests of the state and that shape the church's agenda. Some Christians today feel that these factors have resulted in Jesus of Nazareth, his life and teaching, becoming sidelined or buried. For some, it feels like Jesus' teaching has been covered with layers of dogma that suit the church's agenda, and result in Jesus being hidden from view, almost becoming irrelevant. There is a growing movement to get back to the basics, to rediscover Jesus and his message, to live as he lived and to follow what he taught. The growth of, and interest in, the Anabaptist movement in the UK,<sup>7</sup> and the increasing numbers of people becoming involved in groups such as #Love Makes A Way in Australia are indicative of this.

Such people are seeking to be disciples of Jesus – radical disciples, in the meaning of radical as *radix*, “root”; getting back to the root of Christianity which is Jesus of Nazareth, his life, activity, and teaching, his call to us. Radical also has a political and social meaning: those who are radical want to change the status quo. Those Christians who undertake the task of what is termed “speaking truth to power”, familiarising themselves with injustice and speaking out about it, who side with those who suffer injustice, are also radical in the sense of politically and socially radical. Jesus was socially and politically radical in his time. There is an aspect of the prophet in radical discipleship.

Speaking personally, this is where I come from: radical in both senses of the word. I have, for as long as I can remember, been interested in the person of Jesus, his life, his teachings, his example, his call to us. Why do we treat others badly when we have the Sermon on the Mount telling us how to behave? Why are we violent when we are told to love our enemies and turn the other cheek? Why are we so consumption-driven when we are told not to accumulate wealth or serve a master other than the Holy One? I have felt the weight of centuries of tradition and doctrine burying Jesus, and have wanted to peel this away. This has

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<sup>7</sup> Stuart Murray Williams, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2011). Location 44.

resulted in a call to learn, to embark upon a journey to discover Jesus and where I stand in relation to him. How should I live, as a follower of Jesus? How do I go about peeling back the layers of the centuries? Why do I feel as if his teaching and life have become secondary instead of primary in the life of the church and the lives of Christians? How do I reclaim Jesus as the foundation of the church? For me and for many others, the answer is in radical discipleship.

There have been radical Christian disciples since the time of Jesus. His group of disciples and followers was radical politically, trying to change the way the people of Israel lived in preparation for the coming Kingdom of God.<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Day of the Catholic Workers' Movement, Martin Luther King, and Oscar Romero are modern radical disciples. For radical disciples, living in different contexts with their own issues, being faithful to Jesus as the revelation of God is paramount. We do this through choices about living simply as well as through spiritual practices. Radical disciples seek to be practical, through service to others, and true to the biblical texts, which often results in priorities that are counter-cultural and disturbing to the complacent. Above all, radical disciples seek justice, particularly for the marginalised and oppressed. We do not suggest that Jesus' teachings should be altered, or weakened, to suit us or the current political agenda. Rather we seek to understand what Jesus' message is in the current situation, and to live by that.

Radical disciples take on the roles of both disciple and prophet, and Jesus is central to all they do. Exegetical and hermeneutical methods as well as the contribution of ideological perspectives are important to radical disciples in interpreting biblical texts. This does not necessarily mean taking everything literally or at face value; rather, it involves reading the life and teachings of Jesus in solidarity with the poor and marginalised. In order to reflect on how this may be done well, radical discipleship requires its own hermeneutic.

The questions which I address in this thesis are:

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce J Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 156-158.

1. What are the key characteristics of a radical discipleship hermeneutic?
2. What further insights does a radical discipleship hermeneutic bring to the interpretation of Mark 12:28–34?

To begin to answer the questions, in Chapter 2 I define radical discipleship for twenty-first century readers, taking into consideration a range of scholars and other writers. In Chapter 3 I use this definition, and the questions that arise from it, to develop a hermeneutic for radical discipleship; a way of reading the Gospels which informs those seeking to follow Jesus authentically. Chapter 4 is an exegesis of the Greatest Commandment from Mark's Gospel, utilising the hermeneutic developed in Chapter 3. In Chapter 5 I present a brief case study of the Love Makes A Way movement as a practical example of the way in which the commandment to love God, ourselves and our neighbours has been utilised in the Australian context. Finally, in Chapter 6 I discuss the question of whether the Greatest Commandment, viewed through the lens of radical discipleship, is the benchmark for individual Christian and church living.

My reading on radical discipleship, on Mark's Gospel, and on justice, has been greatly influenced by Ched Myers' books and his other writings. Following some of his recommendations has led me to a range of scholars and authors who have written on radical discipleship and on following Jesus. John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, although they do not explicitly call the discipleship they write about "radical", encourage modern, western disciples to be more aware of injustice and the role of their governments in its perpetuation. Their work has helped me clarify my thinking over several years. In Australia, Athol Gill is considered the father of modern radical discipleship and his book *Life on the Road* has recently been reprinted. John Hirt's PhD thesis *Radical Discipleship: Towards the Theology and Socio-Political Implications*, has proved an invaluable resource. Dave Andrews' books on the Beatitudes, the work of Anthony Gittens, Rob Bos, and Anabaptist scholars such as Stuart Murray Williams and John

Howard Yoder have all contributed in some way to my thinking on radical discipleship and to my own personal journey.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 1 for list of authors and their works referred to here.

## Chapter 2

### Radical discipleship

In this chapter I define radical discipleship for twenty-first century followers of Jesus, examining the key characteristics by drawing from definitions by scholars, practitioners and teachers.

What I propose to undertake in this and subsequent chapters is complex because there are many legitimate forms of discipleship, and because who Jesus was, and what he really said, is contested. The radical discipleship which is the concern of this thesis is in the prophetic tradition of being in solidarity with the marginalised and those in danger of being marginalised. Few can doubt that Jesus was, among many other things, a prophet in the First Testament sense of the word, speaking truth about injustice to the powerful and urging them to change.

#### Radical disciples in history

Over the centuries, there have been many diverse Christian groups and individuals, some radical, some not. These range from the earliest, counter-cultural faith communities, desert fathers and mothers, charitable orders of monks and nuns serving the poor and the sick, through to modern communities and individuals who are called to service as Christians.

Bruce Chilton describes Jesus as a *mamzer*, in his case a child whose father is unknown.<sup>10</sup> He states: "If Joseph and Mary were known not to be living together, even though they were betrothed, that would account for Jesus' repute as a *mamzer* in Nazareth."<sup>11</sup> If this was the case, Jesus would have known what it was like to be on the margins of society. Even if this was not the case, living in a small village in Galilee, far from the centre of Jewish life in Jerusalem, Jesus would have known how people in Galilee were despised by those in Jerusalem. Gerd

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus : An Intimate Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2000). 12.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Chilton\\_Mamzer\\_Jesus\\_Birth.shtml](http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Chilton_Mamzer_Jesus_Birth.shtml)  
Accessed 4 June 2016.

Theissen and Annette Merz state that it is difficult to know, with any degree of certainty, much about how the people of Galilee regarded the temple and the Torah. These scholars continue, stating that, despite some Judeans feeling contempt for Galileans and doubting their loyalty to the temple and Torah, Galileans felt strongly attached to Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> The people and elite of Jerusalem, however, did not feel the same about Galileans. Theissen and Merz cite John's Gospel,<sup>13</sup> in which the crowd states that the Messiah cannot come from Galilee, and the chief priests and Pharisees state that "no prophet is to arise from Galilee". Distance from the heart of Judaism, a different ruler, and the nature of peasant society would have resulted in differences between Galilee and Jerusalem and the ability of Galileans to keep strictly to the purity code. This would have shaped Jesus' attitudes.

The first disciples were the original followers of Jesus; they knew him and his teaching. During his lifetime they lived itinerant lives, moving around, sharing their resources, and being supported by a wider, more settled group of followers. Jesus sent disciples on missions to the nearby villages, but not to larger towns. While on missions, the disciples were strictly limited as to what they took with them, relying on villagers to provide them with food and a place to sleep.<sup>14</sup>

After Jesus' death, some of the disciples lived communally in Jerusalem, sharing their goods and caring for widows and orphans.<sup>15</sup> They were, at times, in trouble with the authorities for what they preached.<sup>16</sup> Very quickly other small faith communities sprang up and grew throughout the Mediterranean area. These communities were settled rather than itinerant, although itinerant preachers and teachers moved about, forming new communities and nurturing existing ones. The Book of Acts describes some of the growth of these communities, and the

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<sup>12</sup> Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1998). 176–8.

<sup>13</sup> John 7:41–52.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 10:1–11; Mark 6:6b–13.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 2:43–47; 4:32–37.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 5:17–42; 7:54–8:3.

movement of itinerant preachers through the region. "The Didache", chapters 11 & 12, sets out rules for how to receive such travelling preachers.<sup>17</sup>

Bruce Malina discusses types of "Jesus groups" and provides insight into how these groups changed both over time and because of membership and location.<sup>18</sup> He names these groups Jesus Groups, Jesus Messiah Groups, Messianic Jesus Groups and Resurrected Jesus Groups and outlines their purpose. The first type of group was political in that members wished Israelites to "get their lives in order" for the coming Kingdom of God. The second type of group was also political, wishing Israelites to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. The purpose of the third type of group was to encourage Israelites who accepted Jesus as the Messiah to live as he taught. The fourth type of group was for Israelites and gentiles who were "called by God" to "live in Christ", supporting each other to do so. Malina identifies the first type with Jesus' disciples. The second is post-crucifixion groups in Jerusalem and other locations where there were enclaves of Jews visited by itinerant apostles, the third is epitomised by Matthew's community, and the fourth by Paul's communities. The political nature of the groups changed over time as groups faced different situations. Zeba Antonin Crook, in a review of Malina's book, states that these models are helpful for those seeking the Jesus of history and his teaching.<sup>19</sup>

This model may be simplistic, but it does provide some useful information about the very early groups which formed after Jesus' death, and how they differed from each other and changed quite quickly. It is possible that the groups contained some who spoke up for the marginalised; certainly Paul encouraged his house church groups to treat each other fairly (Philemon). It is more likely, however, that the new groups were more concerned with their own survival in the face of hostility from Jews and gentiles.

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<sup>17</sup> Aaron Milavec, *The Didache*. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003.) 27-31.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce J Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).. 156-158.

<sup>19</sup> Zeba Antonin Crook, "Bruce J Malina, the Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2002).

Theissen states that the Gospels themselves were written to meet the needs of local communities: “In the Gospels, itinerant radicalism and popular belief in miracles were integrated in a story of Jesus in such a way that Christians living in settled communities could make this Jesus their guide for living.”<sup>20</sup> The nature of radicalism changed as itinerancy gave way to settled communities over time. This is not to say that eventually there were no more itinerant preachers; there have been, and will continue to be, such people, but they are few.

As the church grew, and became more aligned with the state under Constantine, its radical nature was marginalised. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to cover the centuries of church history here, and this has been covered by many scholars in many scholarly works.<sup>21</sup> There were two major events in the history of the church: in the eleventh century CE the church split into two – Roman Catholic and Orthodox – roughly equating with west and east. Then in the sixteenth century CE, Protestants split from the Roman Catholic Church in the Reformation. Some of the groups that split, such as the Anabaptists, were considered very radical and suffered persecution. State-sanctioned churches, for example the Church of England, were considered less radical. Suffice it to say that there have been radical disciples on the margins of mainstream Christianity since discipleship became identified with the state and its interests. Radical disciples are found in many denominations, following Jesus and serving the needy.

### **Radical discipleship today**

The two meanings of radical are the basis of radical discipleship, and both derive from Jesus. Jesus is the root of faith and action and Jesus the prophet is socially and politically radical, showing disciples the way. Both meanings of radical are

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<sup>20</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, trans. Linda M Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 292.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. John McManners, *The Oxford History of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Tim Dowley, *The History of Christianity*. Rev. ed. (Oxford: Lion Pub., 1990); Roland H. Bainton, *The Penguin History of Christianity* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1968).



used in relation to disciples who put Jesus at the centre of their lives, and who want justice for all people.

### **Characteristics of radical discipleship**

There are several essential characteristics and qualities of radical disciples. These characteristics and qualities guide the development of a radical discipleship hermeneutic. The two meanings of the word radical are important for this hermeneutic. From the 'root' or 'fundamental' meaning we derive the centrality of Jesus for radical discipleship, and all that follows from that. If Jesus is the root of what we believe, then he is central. How he lived and what he taught are fundamental to radical discipleship, defining what radical disciples believe and how they act in the world.

From the social and political sense of radical, we derive radical disciples' passion for justice. Ched Myers, in an address to a festival of radical discipleship in 2015, combined both meanings of the word radical in this description of radical discipleship:

Radical Discipleship is about nothing more and nothing less than laying bare the roots of the personal and socio-political pathologies of our imperial society and its dead-end history, even as we seek to recover the roots of our deep biblical tradition: namely, the messianic movement of rebellion and restoration, of repentance and renewal, a "Way out of no way" that has been going on since the dawn of resistance to the dusk of empire.<sup>22</sup>

Myers reminds us that the Jesus movement, the root of Christianity, challenged the status quo in Palestine during the time of Roman rule; a time when the leaders and elite of Jerusalem were exploiting rather than caring for the poor and marginalised. He reminds us that today's empire is damaging to individuals and to society in general, as was that of Rome, and that we need to repent and restore our world to one in which all creation can thrive. Above all, he reminds radical disciples of their role in all of this: of the necessity to speak out and act to change a sick society into a healthy one.

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<sup>22</sup> Myers, "Bartimaeus Kinsler Institute Festival."

This succinctly describes, in broad terms, the nature of radical discipleship and the qualities required by radical disciples. Jesus is central, and radical disciples must speak up about injustice; they must be prophets. For Myers, radical discipleship involves personal change, an examined life, challenging one's own attitudes and behaviour as well as challenging societal structures and the policies and actions of governments and the powerful. It is biblically based: we find answers to questions about how we should live there, in the books about Jesus. It is in the Gospel accounts, particularly Mark's Gospel, that we find the hermeneutical key for reading the biblical witness as a whole. It is here that we find out what God wants from us.

For radical disciples, there is no genuine alternative to this all-encompassing stance. Radical disciples do not see this as an option alongside other options, but as the impulse required by the gospel itself. Lee Camp, Associate Professor of Bible at Lipscomb University, expresses this as follows:

And it is in *this* sense that the Christian faith *is* radical: it demands thoroughgoing transformation, thoroughgoing conversion of every realm of human endeavour, in personal relations, economics, and politics, in homes, culture, and social order. The gospel demands radical discipleship.<sup>23</sup>

All aspects of life are affected by the Gospels' call to radical discipleship. It is counter-cultural, demanding complete change in one's priorities, one's behaviour and the way one lives.

In the next section, I will set out the key elements of radical discipleship in more detail. Most of the elements derive from the centrality of Jesus, but because of their importance I will give them special attention.

### ***1. Jesus is central***

Radical discipleship has Jesus at the centre. Jesus is central to faith, to activity, to behaviour. Asking what Jesus would do in a certain situation may seem trite, but it introduces Jesus' perspective into the decision-making process, and requires

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<sup>23</sup> Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship : Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 27. Author italics.

one to know Jesus' attitudes, sayings, choices and priorities. How Jesus lived and what he taught is the basis for life.

The centrality of Jesus means that what Jesus does and says in the Gospels takes precedence over the writings of the First Testament and the other texts in the Second Testament. Jesus is the revelation of God, not Paul or the deutero-Pauline letters. Paul's writing may aid the process of discernment, but the ultimate authority is Jesus. However, knowing what Jesus actually said is, of course, problematic. We have no documents written or dictated by Jesus. We have the Gospels and other writings, derived from stories and traditions about Jesus and what he said and did, written for a particular community in its context. At best we can make informed estimations, and give our reasons for these. I expand on this below, when discussing justice.

Jesus was many things, state Theissen and Merz: a charismatic; a prophet; a healer; a poet; a teacher; the founder of a cult; a martyr.<sup>24</sup> He was a holy man, a mystic, with intimate knowledge and understanding of the sacred. For radical disciples, Jesus as prophet, focussing on justice for the marginalised, is very important.

#### *a) Following Jesus*

A corollary of the centrality of Jesus is that radical disciples *follow* Jesus. Following Jesus means that he is the leader and he shows the way. He shows us how to live: simply, putting others first, and serving them. He shows us how to relate to others, and that no-one is not worthy of a relationship. He teaches us about God and about how to pray. He teaches about love and justice. Harold Bender, in the 1944 pamphlet *The Anabaptist Vision*, states that "The true test of the Christian ... is discipleship. The great word of the Anabaptists was not 'faith' as it was for the reformers, but 'following.'"<sup>25</sup> Anabaptist and Mennonite teaching is experiencing a resurgence amongst Christians, especially in the UK,

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<sup>24</sup> Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide.*, 185–472.

<sup>25</sup> Harold S Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*, (Scottsdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 1944)., Location 206.

seeking a more authentic way of being Christian in the modern world, possibly because of the focus on discipleship and following Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

Other scholars and writers also describe discipleship as following Jesus. John Hirt, an Australian minister, academic, teacher and practitioner of radical discipleship, says: "radical discipleship is rooted in a profound commitment to the triune God and the Spirit inspired following of Jesus Christ as the risen and crucified Lord".<sup>27</sup> For Hirt, radical disciples are deeply committed to God. In order to follow Jesus faithfully, they seek and receive guidance from the Holy Spirit. This involves spending time reading, in prayer and in discernment, with others and alone.

Lee Camp states: "Jesus of Nazareth, the Gospel accounts relate, always comes asking disciples to follow him – not merely 'accept him,' not merely 'believe in him,' not merely 'worship him,' but to follow him: one either follows Christ, or one does not."<sup>28</sup> 'Follow' here is a word of action, requiring activity on the part of the disciple. Radical disciples are active in their following of Jesus and they learn to follow Jesus by closely examining what he does as well as what he says. Jesus is the exemplar. The activity is practical, as in service, and can involve acts of protest and civil disobedience in the face of injustices.

Marcus Borg states:

But the gospel as 'the way of Jesus' suggests a path and a person to be followed, and not primarily a set of beliefs to be believed. Verses two and three [Mark 1] are not simply Mark's introduction to John the Baptizer. Rather, they sound the theme of Jesus as the 'way of the Lord' – and he calls people to follow the way that he taught and that Mark saw revealed in him.<sup>29</sup>

The words 'follow' and 'way' at the beginning of Mark's Gospel are a strong call to disciples in his community and today to follow Jesus actively and live as he lived and taught. This does not necessarily mean living an itinerant life; some

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<sup>26</sup> "The Anabaptist Network," <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/468>.

<sup>27</sup> John Hirt, "Radical Discipleship: "Towards the Theology and Socio-Political Implications"" (The University of Sydney 1998)., 5.

<sup>28</sup> Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Marcus Borg, *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Mark*, (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2009)., Location 181.

may choose this, but others live more settled lives and serve their community and the wider world from there.

*b) Radical discipleship is costly*

Radical disciples understand that following Jesus may be difficult and costly. For some, radical discipleship has resulted in death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood up to the Nazis before and during World War II, and was executed days before the camp where he was imprisoned was liberated. He discusses the differences between cheap and costly grace in terms of discipleship:

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate ... Costly grace is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him ... Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*.<sup>30</sup>

For Bonhoeffer discipleship demanded everything, as it has for many others who have been killed or imprisoned for standing up to the powerful and refusing to do what they know is wrong. Disciples must be prepared for this possibility. Jesus' promise to disciples is that, whatever the cost of following him, this will not prove too difficult because he will be with them (Matt 28:20).

For Rob Bos, Uniting Church in Australia minister, Christian life, with Jesus as the root, involves costly discipleship. The disciple makes Jesus' priorities their own. Bos' use of the term 'Christian life' makes discipleship total, all-encompassing. Bos makes the two meanings of radical explicit:

...the Christian life could never just be a matter of accepting "cheap grace;" simply receiving God's gifts without a corresponding response of "costly discipleship". This entails living according to the passions and priorities of Jesus. Such discipleship is radical, both in the sense of

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<sup>30</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (London: SCM, 2001)., 36-37. Author italics.

starkly calling into question the social order, and of going back to our roots – the roots of our faith – Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>31</sup>

Following Jesus can be costly in terms of family relationships and the disciple's relationship with the state. Families may disapprove of the beliefs and actions of disciples, causing alienation. Discipleship involves standing up to the state, speaking out against injustice, and undertaking non-violent actions which the state may consider illegal in order to draw attention to injustice.<sup>32</sup> Ched Myers states: "Jesus' vision of the Kingdom challenges both the domesticating family and the dominating State. No wonder radical discipleship remains marginal in our churches!"<sup>33</sup>

Jesus' own family came to see him, but he refused to see them, saying that the disciples are his mother and brothers and sisters (Mark 3:31-35). The powerful and influential Jewish religious and political elites viewed him as a threat to the status quo, and were concerned that his actions would create civil unrest with attendant consequences from the Roman occupiers. Radical discipleship can also have consequences for relationships with other Christians, who disapprove of one's actions, and with the institutional church itself, which finds itself challenged to be true to Jesus' teaching. In the verses from Mark cited above, Jesus speaks of creating new, non-familial groups of like-minded people with discipleship and service as the common bonds. Malina and Rohrbaugh call such groups 'fictive kin-groups'. In the Mediterranean region of the first century CE, such groups existed but the most important group was the family. People gained

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<sup>31</sup> Rob Bos, "Credible Christianity,"  
<http://www.robertbos.unitingchurch.org.au/id31.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> Ched Myers, "Mark: Invitation to Discipleship," in *The New Testament: Introducing the Way of Discipleship*, ed. Sharon Ringe and Wes Howard Brook (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002). 1.

<sup>33</sup> Myers, "Binding the Strong Man: Jesus' Master Metaphor,"  
<http://radicaldiscipleship.net/2015/06/04/binding-the-strong-man-jesus-master-metaphor/>.

their identity and security from the family group, so leaving one's family was uncommon.<sup>34</sup>

### *c) Radical discipleship is biblical*

Camp states that the "Gospel demands radical discipleship".<sup>35</sup> Myers describes radical discipleship as, in part, seeking "the roots of our deep biblical tradition" where we find "the messianic movement of rebellion and restoration, of repentance and renewal". Hirt states that radical discipleship "seeks to speak from the *radix* (Latin, 'root'): a discipleship that quests to be true to the 'root truths' of a biblical and fundamental following of Jesus".<sup>36</sup> Jesus is the revelation of God for Christians, and as a prophet is the most important one in a long line of prophets in the biblical texts. The prophetic tradition is key in the radical discipleship hermeneutic. Jesus, in this tradition, sought the renewal of Israel: a return to Israel as God intended it to be. God's intention for Israel was for it to be a nation where God was the one God, and people treated each other, particularly the marginalised, with justice.<sup>37</sup> Myers' words above include "renewal": today's radical disciples, as prophets, seek the renewal of both the people of God and the society in which they live. For many writers and followers of Jesus such as Camp, radical discipleship is imperative: it is the response elicited by the biblical texts.

### **2. Radical discipleship is about justice**

From the social and political meaning of radical comes the importance of justice to radical discipleship. This is the other half of the radical discipleship coin. Radical disciples are prophets, speaking truth to power. They are activists, working towards justice and against injustice.

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<sup>34</sup> Bruce J Malina and Richard L Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Kindle ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).. 101.

<sup>35</sup> Camp, *Mere Discipleship : Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World*. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Hirt, "Radical Discipleship: "Towards the Theology and Socio-Political Implications".," 14.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Horsley, *The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel*. (William B Eerdmans Publishing Co: Grand Rapids, MI, 2012.) 97-103.

Jesus was passionate about justice for those in his society whose circumstances (for example poverty, sickness and ethnicity) meant that they were marginalised. He understood the role of the Jewish elites in creating and perpetuating injustice, and tried to make them change. Radical disciples follow his example in this. Radical disciples' sense of justice includes speaking out about the societal structures which create and perpetuate disadvantage both within nation-states and worldwide. Both governments and corporations, as well as individuals, can and do instigate and maintain injustice for their own advantage. From a variety of ideological criticisms, such as liberation theology and postcolonial criticism, modern radical disciples learn what it means for people affected by oppression and colonialism to speak up for themselves, and for radical disciples to join with them in speaking up for justice. Feminist criticism alerts disciples to the patriarchal nature of ancient and modern societies and the manifestation of this in documents. Socio-political criticism highlights the societal and political situation of the text and the author.

John Hirt says that the radical disciple's commitment to "the God of Jesus Christ is anchored in an insistence that the poor will be history's subjects as the beloved of God". He continues:

...radical discipleship is a praxis-rooted theology subversive of what I have designated as "Caesaroimperialism" and its legitimating myths. And, that as such, radical discipleship is directly tied to the prophetic tradition of giving voice to the voiceless, the forgotten and the marginalized.<sup>38</sup>

Hirt uses the term 'Caesaroimperialism' to describe "all contemporary expressions of dominance that are global in character" as well as the Roman Empire of New Testament times. Myers speaks of "laying bare the roots of the personal and socio-political pathologies of our imperial society" and Rob Bos of "starkly calling into question the social order". Radical disciples are always concerned with the effects of the system, the status quo, the social order, on the poor, the marginalised, those who feel its effects the most.

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<sup>38</sup> Hirt, "Radical Discipleship: "Towards the Theology and Socio-Political Implications".". 5.



Radical disciples are called upon to challenge and undermine dominance and the language it uses to ensure its acceptability. The world is familiar with the phrase “bringing freedom and democracy” employed by the current empire to make its own actions appear just and desirable: to perpetuate the myth of its benevolence. In Roman times the phrase “Pax Romana” implied that Rome was bringing peace and its consequence, prosperity, to its vassal states. This may well have been the case. However, the vast majority of the population still faced the possibility of dispossession, displacement and poverty as taxes to support the empire were heavy.<sup>39</sup> Radical disciples seek to know and interpret what is really happening and to understand the effects of this on ordinary people. Propaganda must be named for what it is by followers of Jesus. Today, this includes exposing the interests of those who cast doubt on the facts about global warming, its causes and effects, and partnering with those who seek to mitigate these effects, as well as addressing the causes. All of creation must be cared for because all of creation is God’s, and we are interconnected with it.

For radical disciples, Jesus is the revelation of God. God’s preferential option, we learn from liberation theology, is for the poor.<sup>40</sup> The poor are those without a voice, the marginalised, the oppressed and the ignored. Thus radical disciples work towards overthrowing current power structures which perpetuate the situation of the poor, and the stories by which these are made to seem legitimate. Radical disciples are modern prophets, telling the world what life is like for the poor, the outcast and those on the edges of society, and doing what they can to change this.

Radical disciples have Jesus at the centre of their lives. They follow Jesus and live by his own life and his teaching. They accept that discipleship may be costly to themselves and their families, friends and fellow Christians. They turn to the Bible for guidance. They talk about, and act to end, injustice wherever it occurs. Radical discipleship is active, practical and vocal, and works towards countering the prevailing cultural norms which support the status quo.

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<sup>39</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 51-52.

<sup>40</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. (London: SCM Press, 1974.) xxv.

From these scholars, practitioners and teachers, radical discipleship has two components which combine to form something greater: the way of Jesus which we are called to follow is radical in terms of its focus on justice and inclusion, and radical in terms of getting back to the root of Christianity – Jesus of Nazareth. To become a radical disciple is to follow Jesus as Lord, and to live out that following in the practice of justice and compassion.

There is a totality in radical discipleship; an element of total transformation to the way of Jesus, total commitment to following wherever this may lead. For some, it leads to dangerous situations in places of violence. For others, it leads to acts of non-violent resistance and protest against unjust laws and policies of government or other institutions. It involves speaking about what is unjust to those who do not want to hear. It involves engagement with the marginalised, the rejected, the poor, the displaced, the persecuted, but not on our terms. It means involvement with these people on their terms, so that the engagement is non-paternalistic and not discriminatory in any way.

Radical discipleship is uncomfortable. It can lead to ostracism, loneliness and persecution. This is the meaning of taking up one's cross (Mark 8:34): what can happen when we follow Jesus as he calls us to follow him. But his promise to us as his disciples is that he will be with us no matter what happens (Matt 28:20).

### **Mark's Gospel and discipleship**

Many scholars regard Mark's Gospel as having discipleship as one of its themes and focuses.<sup>41</sup> This is particularly apparent if one reads the Gospel from beginning to end in one sitting; one is left with a sense of being called to undertake the discipleship journey from its beginnings in Galilee, to spread the word, to answer 'I will go!' Responding to the Gospel in this manner is

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<sup>41</sup> Wilfrid Harrington, *Mark*, ed. Wilfred Harrington and Donald Senior (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1979); Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*; Myers, "Mark: Invitation to Discipleship"; Robert Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," in *The Interpretation of Mark*, ed. W. Telford (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995); Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company).

considered to be the response of the ideal reader.<sup>42</sup> David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie continue: “Our overall conclusion is *that the story of Mark seeks to create readers who will receive the rule of God with faith and have the courage to follow Jesus whatever the consequences.*”<sup>43</sup> These authors state that Mark achieves this through his narrative style, in which Jesus is constantly present to the reader, leading readers to identify completely with him.

For R. T. France, the two main messages of Mark’s Gospel are Christology and discipleship: “who Jesus is and what it means to follow him”.<sup>44</sup> He continues, saying that Mark presents the disciples to his readers, and no doubt to his community as the next generation of disciples, to show them what it means to follow Jesus, and how to do this. The fact that the disciples have so much trouble understanding Jesus’ message and teaching, and fail so often, shows their humanity. France states that:

...it is far from inconceivable that in real life a group of ordinary men caught up in such an extraordinary story should respond like that, as they confronted at first hand and without warning a revolution of ideas and values which much of the Christian church still struggles to comprehend after twenty centuries of conditioning.<sup>45</sup>

This succinctly describes the situation and experience of the first disciples. It is easy for us, with the familiarity of the story and with hindsight, to forget what following Jesus meant for these men, and for women (Mark 15:40-41) and how difficult it must have been for them to understand him, despite his charisma. In a similar situation, how many later readers would leave their homes to follow such a person? France believes that Mark wants his readers to learn from the mistakes of the first disciples, and not make the same ones themselves.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 138.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, author emphasis.

<sup>44</sup> RT France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed. I Howard Marshall and Donald A Hagner, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002)., 23.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 28.

Myers says that there are three calls to discipleship in Mark's Gospel. The final call, the call at the unfinished end of the Gospel leaves us "not with a neat resolution but with a terrible ultimatum" which is that "if we wish the story of discipleship to continue we cannot remain mere spectators".<sup>47</sup> And if we want to see Jesus, we must respond and follow him, in discipleship, on the way. If we want others to know about him, we must respond and follow him. If we want the world to be a place of justice, restorative, distributive and social justice for all, as he did, we must respond and follow him.

For me, Mark's Gospel elicits a response to follow Jesus on his way, a way of service, healing, love and forgiveness, of speaking the truth about injustice wherever it occurs, and being prepared to accept whatever might result from this.

Thus radical discipleship is radical in two senses of the word: radical as root or foundation and radical as socially and politically radical. Jesus is the source of both as he is the basis of how radical disciples seek to live and as a prophet he shows radical disciples how to act in solidarity with the marginalised. Mark's Gospel, with a focus on Christology and discipleship, is a rich source of guidance for radical disciples.

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<sup>47</sup> Myers et al., "Say to This Mountain," Location 3578.

## Chapter 3

### A radical discipleship hermeneutic

In this chapter I elucidate what is essential for a radical discipleship hermeneutic and how this differs from other hermeneutics.

The two meanings of the word 'radical' - root or foundation and socially and politically radical - provide the basis for understanding radical discipleship.

Radical discipleship has Jesus as its centre and foundation. It is about following Jesus and living as he lived and taught. Thus, like Jesus, radical disciples are in solidarity with those who are marginalised, and they seek to ensure that no new groups are marginalised. So it is about justice (politically and socially radical). Radical disciples speak the truth about injustice and are involved in bringing justice to those in situations which are unjust. In seeking justice, radical disciples act in the tradition of the First Testament prophets.

The *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* defines hermeneutics as “the art or theory of interpretation”.<sup>48</sup> The terms hermeneutics and exegesis are often used together. W. Randolph Tate says hermeneutics is “the study of the locus of meaning and the principles of interpreting texts”.<sup>49</sup> This author goes on to say that hermeneutics was “traditionally bipolar, involving exegesis and interpretation (for modern readers)”.<sup>50</sup> For Tate, “exegesis is the process of examining a text in order to ascertain what its first readers would have understood it to mean ... Interpretation is the task of explaining or drawing out the implications of that understanding for contemporary readers.”<sup>51</sup>

The above description of radical discipleship elucidates what those who wish to follow Jesus authentically are seeking when reading the Gospels. The fact that

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<sup>48</sup> Ian A. McFarland et al. (eds), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Location 11103.

<sup>49</sup> W. Randolph Tate, *Handbook for Biblical Interpretation.*, 2nd. Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 194. Author emphasis.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

radical discipleship is about those who wish to live according to Jesus' life and teaching indicates that the basis of a radical discipleship hermeneutic is theological: it seeks to know God.<sup>52</sup> For Christians, Jesus is the revelation of God. A radical discipleship hermeneutic should assist radical disciples to find answers to questions about how they should live and act in the world. Living and acting as Jesus lived and taught can be costly.

Hermeneutics has a long history.<sup>53</sup> In recent times a philosophical discipline has developed around it, concerned with this complex field of the interpretation of texts. Before moving to focus on a radical discipleship hermeneutic, it is helpful to survey the building blocks of our understanding of hermeneutics more generally.

The hermeneutical relationship between the meaning of a text and the construction of that meaning is widely conceptualised as a circle. Anthony Thiselton states that this circle has two meanings. In one meaning, understanding the whole (of a text, for example) requires understanding of the parts such as the grammar and the vocabulary, and these two understandings work together to increase overall understanding. In the other meaning, pre-understanding and fuller understanding work together to bring about deeper understanding.<sup>54</sup> Pre-understanding is brought to the text by the reader.

Elsewhere, Thiselton states that conceptualising hermeneutics as a spiral is more accurate.<sup>55</sup> This is because pre-understanding and understanding of the whole work together constructively to develop greater understanding.

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<sup>52</sup> Michael J Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010)., 46, citing Kevin J. Vanhoozer (gen. ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 24.

<sup>53</sup> Alexander S. Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, S C M Core Texts (London: SCM Press, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Anthony C Thiselton, "Hermeneutical Circle," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005)., 281.

<sup>55</sup> *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009)., Location 458.

For Thiselton, hermeneutics has 'two horizons': the historical context of the text, in this case the New Testament writings, and the context of the interpreter. Both of these must be taken into account when interpreting texts. Michael Gorman states that, for some hermeneutics theorists such as Gadamer and Ricoeur, fusion of these two horizons is essential for today's reader's understanding of the meaning of the text. Gorman points out that: "For believers, this application or appropriation" (fusion) "can never be merely intellectual or theoretical. The final goal of exegesis is actualization, or embodiment – living the text. The ultimate goal of exegesis is for the individual and community to become a *living exegesis* of the text."<sup>56</sup> Gorman identifies an existential exegetical approach as one which seeks to engage with the text to find meaning beyond the text. This approach is used in theological hermeneutics.<sup>57</sup> Gorman's contribution is particularly significant for the purposes of articulating a radical discipleship hermeneutic because radical disciples seek to become this living exegesis of Jesus. This is fundamental to the radical discipleship hermeneutic. I shall return to his work more fully below.

Today, Tate says, hermeneutics includes the methodology utilised by the interpreter as well as all that the interpreter brings to the interpretation, for example knowledge, cultural assumptions, ideology and questions. It is important for interpreters to acknowledge these, as they affect their interpretation.

Tate discusses "three different categories of methods" involved in both the principles and processes of interpretation. These are:

1. author-centred interpretation (with attention directed to the world behind the text);
2. text-centred interpretation (with the focus on the world of the text); and

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<sup>56</sup> Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 160. Author italics.

<sup>57</sup> Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 13-20.

3. reader-centred interpretation (with a focus on the world in front of the text and reader activities).<sup>58</sup>

These three categories are known generally as the ***world behind the text***, the ***world of the text***, and the ***world in front of the text***, and all need to be included in a thorough interpretation of a text.

The world behind the text is author-centred and has a historical focus. Historical criticism and social science criticism are important for understanding this world. The world of the text is centred on the text itself. The world in front of the text is the world of the reader, and all that a reader brings to the text such as cultural assumptions and understanding. Narrative, rhetorical, reader response and ideological criticisms are important here. The types of criticism and methods of exegesis are not confined to a specific “world”; rather they overlap and interact to a greater or lesser extent in ascertaining the meaning of a text.

Scholars such as Thiselton, Tate and Gorman, and many others, elucidate hermeneutics and exegesis, and describe how hermeneutics is used to increase understanding of texts in the hermeneutical spiral. Hermeneutics, exegesis and contextualisation, the past and present horizons of the text, the spiral of increasing understanding and all that the reader brings to the text, are all important for the thorough and thoughtful interpretation of ancient texts, including the Bible.

Radical disciples want to make sure that they understand the meaning of Jesus’ teaching in his time, as this informs meaning for today. The exegetical approach for a radical discipleship hermeneutic will draw on the three worlds of the text to achieve as nuanced an understanding of Jesus’ teaching and actions as possible, so that the individual and the community can become a *living exegesis* of the text.

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<sup>58</sup> Tate, *Handbook for Biblical Interpretation*. 194-195.



In the following section, we examine Michael Gorman's theological hermeneutics, which will establish the connection between a radical discipleship hermeneutic and a missional hermeneutic.

## Theological hermeneutics

Theological hermeneutics is concerned with knowing God. Gorman states that theological interpretation should involve careful and close reading of the biblical texts because God speaks through the text.<sup>59</sup> Later in the same text he states that "For people of faith, the essential question is, 'What claims about God and about God's claims on us does the text make?'"<sup>60</sup>

Because, says Gorman, the role of the church is to embody and bring about the mission of God, the *missio Dei*, this adds a further dimension to theological interpretation.<sup>61</sup> As radical disciples seek to follow Jesus authentically, and to internalise his priorities and passions, radical discipleship is a way in which the *missio Dei* can be accomplished. The *missio Dei* is reconciliation of the whole creation, which is not necessarily what some Christians understand as "mission".<sup>62</sup> Gorman states that there are five questions that need to be asked concerning what the text says about God's mission. Modified for the purposes of radical disciples, these are:

1. What does the text say about God's mission, as revealed in Jesus?
2. What does the text say about people and the world of Jesus' day, and, by analogy, of today?
3. What does the text say about the purpose of the disciples?
4. How does the text relate to all Scripture, God's mission, and the purpose of the reign of God?

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<sup>59</sup> Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis.*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>62</sup> Uniting Church in Australia Assembly U C A, The Basis of Union, <https://assembly.uca.org.au/basis-of-union-1971-1992>.

5. How might radical disciples purposefully read this text in order to participate in God's mission?<sup>63</sup>

Seeking to follow Jesus authentically should inevitably result in participation in the *missio Dei*, because Jesus is the revelation of God.

In seeking to follow Jesus authentically, radical disciples wish to know:

- what Jesus said, taught and lived: this entails gathering information about the 'historical' Jesus;
- the meaning of what Jesus said, taught and lived to those he called to be his disciples during his life, and to the authors, early hearers and readers of the Gospels: this can be obtained through historical and social scientific criticism, form, literary, rhetorical, narrative and redaction criticism, canonical and ideological criticisms;
- the meaning of Jesus' life and teaching in their own context;
- all of these as they relate to Jesus as prophet.

The Bible is important for what is known about Jesus, his life and his teaching. Although much information is gained from those who have studied Jesus' life, the Bible is the basis of this information. Radical disciples, seeking to follow Jesus authentically, accept that the Bible has authority in providing information about how Jesus lived, behaved and what he taught. Radical disciples trust the Bible. However, many will be suspicious of interpretations and traditions that have formed around Jesus, because these obscure and distort his life and message, and as radical disciples they wish to 'get back to basics' of Jesus' life and teaching. Understanding who Jesus was, particularly as a prophet in his own context, assists radical disciples to understand what he means for us today: to make the connection between the prophet Jesus and twenty-first century prophets. The Gospels interact with what we know of Jesus in his context to deepen understanding.

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<sup>63</sup> Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*. 162.

## Radical discipleship hermeneutic

The centrality of Jesus to radical disciples means that they want to see Jesus as clearly as possible, and to understand him and his teaching as much as is possible. The layers of centuries of doctrine and interpretation by churches and scholars, often with specific agendas and motives distorting the true meaning of the text, need clearing for such disciples. They are suspicious, not of the biblical texts themselves, but of bias in translation and interpretation. They are also suspicious of what they have been told about who Jesus was as a man in his place and time, and what this meant in terms of how he was regarded by his fellow Jews. Rob Bos says that radical disciples should live according to “Jesus’ passions and priorities”.<sup>64</sup> To do this requires knowing as much about Jesus as possible.

The questions “Who was Jesus in his time and place? What was his time? What was his place?” are very relevant here. Rediscovering Jesus in this way demands methods for finding out about the **world behind the text**. Historical criticism, or the historical-critical method,<sup>65</sup> and social science criticism are important. Historical criticism seeks to find out about why, where, by whom and for whom the text was written, and about the historical situation. Social scientific criticism seeks to find out about the culture and its norms, and the social, historical, religious, literary and economic context in which the text was written. Social sciences such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies are used. Archaeological findings contribute. These disciplines can take interpreters deeper into the world behind the text than the methods of historical criticism alone, which include form, redaction and source criticism which focus more on the text. Theissen stresses that

...the study of cultural context and political history in the Gospels makes no comprehensive hermeneutical claim. It does not aim to determine the meaning of the text itself, but instead to identify the context in

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<sup>64</sup> Bos, "Credible Christianity".

<sup>65</sup> Tate, *Handbook for Biblical Interpretation.*, 197.

which its meaning becomes visible, vital, and often, for the first time, unambiguous.<sup>66</sup>

Thus historical and political criticism and social science criticism are not the tools which provide the meaning of the text; rather they are the tools which provide the context of the text. Other tools contribute to the meaning, and there is no substitute for careful and thoughtful interpretation.

The writer and the location of the place of writing are important, although for ancient texts this is not always possible to ascertain with any level of certainty. It is possible, however, to propose some informed hypotheses of these, as well as of the likely audience of the original text. Just as modern texts are written in the context of a culture, and for a particular audience, so too were ancient texts. We have some knowledge of the diverse early Christian communities of the first century, and how they differed depending upon their location. For example, Jerusalem Christian groups were largely made up of believing Jews from Judea and the Diaspora, whereas groups further west had a majority of Gentiles, and were often more cosmopolitan, being located in cities of the empire. These factors affected the groups' attitude towards keeping the Torah. We know that, for groups outside Palestine and with Gentile members, food laws and circumcision were an issue (Acts 11:1-3; 15:1-21; Galatians).

The centrality of Jesus means that radical disciples have concerns about the text itself. This is the ***world of the text***. They want to have access to a text that is as close to the original as possible, and if a translation, one that is as accurate as possible. When examining the world of the text, the types of text, or form, the sources and redaction of the text, and the use of grammar and vocabulary of the time are considered. The author's use of rhetoric and narrative and their effects are also considered. Characterisation is important; for example, how Jesus, the disciples or individuals such as Pontius Pilate are depicted. The use of other texts, particularly from the First Testament, is examined, particularly where reference is made to the prophets, or their words or actions are mentioned. All of these

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<sup>66</sup> Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*. 19.

provide further information about Jesus, and about what he meant to the author and the audience or readers of the text at the time.

The *world in front of the text* is the world of the reader. For this thesis, this is the contemporary world as seen through the lens of solidarity with the marginalised. Each radical disciple has been brought up in a specific culture and society, with its norms and assigned cultural meanings. The disciple will have more or less internalised these norms and meanings. The political environment will have discouraged, to a greater or lesser extent, dissent and questioning of the status quo. Texts of various types will have specific meanings attached to them, and norms surrounding their use and how they are to be read. The disciple may have grown up within a faith community, with a spectrum of possible beliefs and assumptions about Jesus, God, the disciples and the church itself. Disciples' awareness of all the cultural, societal, political, economic and religious assumptions will vary greatly. However, radical disciples' desire to follow Jesus authentically necessarily entails self-examination. Thus radical disciples may have greater awareness of their society and its norms and the effect of these on themselves, and greater awareness of the effect of the text on themselves than other, less self-aware, readers.

The *world in front of the text* is the world created by the text, where reader and text interact.<sup>67</sup> For theological hermeneutics, the tools and methods used are those which elucidate the reader's theology and the *missio Dei*. Gorman states that the exegesis "is done in the context of a specific religious tradition and for religious purposes".<sup>68</sup> In the parameters of this thesis, there is no specific religious tradition except for Christian discipleship in general, but there is a religious purpose. This is to learn how to live as a radical disciple, following Jesus authentically.

"Canonical criticism" and "embodiment or actualisation" or internalisation are mentioned by Gorman as being used in the context of the *world in front of the*

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<sup>67</sup> Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis.*, 17.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

text. Canonical criticism, in which the text is analysed as part of the entire biblical text, may be used by radical disciples, especially the books of the prophets and the Gospels. Embodiment, specifically for this thesis in the sense used by Gorman, of becoming like Jesus, is essential.<sup>69</sup>

Ideological criticism is essential for radical disciples, because, like Jesus, they are passionate about justice. Liberation theology, black, womanist and feminist theology, and postcolonial criticisms are all important. Greater understanding of, and knowledge about, Jesus, gained from the methods used in interpreting other worlds of the text, are used by radical disciples to clarify where Jesus stood, and what he taught, on the treatment of others. Interpretation from the position of those who suffer injustice lays bare such injustice and lays the foundation for action to end it. Ideological criticism is central to the radical discipleship hermeneutic, as hearing the voices of the marginalised can lead to their inclusion, and can prevent further marginalisation. Radical disciples are called to be prophets, as Jesus was a prophet, and this is the bridge between the meaning of Jesus' teachings to his contemporaries and his meaning to radical disciples today.

Ideological criticism is used, to a varying extent, in all worlds of the text. The text itself may express an ideology that influences what is expressed and how it is expressed. There may be ideology apparent in the society of the time of writing which influences the text. Radical disciples wish to expose ideology and clarify its influence because of its relationship to justice and the treatment of the powerless.

A radical discipleship hermeneutic is theological and ideological. It requires the best of biblical scholarship to articulate who Jesus was and what we can know about his context. It makes use of methods which clarify and elucidate the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world in front of the text, to express the centrality of Jesus and all that that entails. The radical disciple, bringing her or his socialisation and biases to the text, engages with the Gospels

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<sup>69</sup> Idem.

and the prophetic literature, in community and alone, to learn to follow Jesus authentically, or as Myers says, recovering “the roots of our deep biblical tradition: namely, the messianic movement of rebellion and restoration, of repentance and renewal”.<sup>70</sup>

Ideology, specifically the ideological critical stance of solidarity with the marginalised, is essential to this hermeneutic, thereby “laying bare the roots of the personal and socio-political pathologies of our imperial society and its dead-end history”.<sup>71</sup> Thus radical disciples take on the role of the prophet and act to overcome oppression, as Jesus was and did.

In conclusion, the three worlds of the text will be examined with a specific theological and ideological lens, shaped around the questions adapted from Gorman. To reiterate, these are:

1. What does the text say about God’s mission, as revealed in Jesus?
2. What does the text say about people and the world of Jesus’ day, and, by analogy, of today?
3. What does the text say about the purpose of the disciples?
4. How does the text relate to all Scripture, God’s mission, and the purpose of the reign of God?
5. How might radical disciples purposefully read this text in order to participate in God’s mission?

A radical discipleship hermeneutic will draw on the three worlds of the text to achieve as nuanced an understanding of Jesus’ actions and teaching as possible, so that the individual and community can become a *living exegesis* of the text. It will give particular attention to the questions set out above, which articulate the ideological and theological lens appropriate to a radical discipleship hermeneutic.

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<sup>70</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strongman: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008; repr., Twentieth Anniversary Edition)., "Bartimaeus Kinsler Institute Festival."

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 4

### Exegesis of Mark 12:28–34

<sup>28</sup>One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup>you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup>The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” <sup>32</sup>Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; <sup>33</sup> and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” <sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question. (Mar 12:28–34 NRSV)

This pericope comes as the fifth and final in a series of challenge and response pericopae where Jesus was challenged by authoritative groups in the temple. This type of discussion was common amongst rabbis, as they debated the meaning of Scripture. His response to each challenge resulted in an increase in his honour, since he left his challengers unable to answer.<sup>72</sup> In the first pericope his authority was challenged by the chief priests, the scribes and the elders (Mark 11:27–33). The second is a parable in which Jesus responded to these groups, implying that they were unfit to govern Israel as they were not caring for the people of Israel as they were charged to do by God (Mark 12:1–12). In the third Jesus was approached by Pharisees and Herodians and asked a question designed to trap him, concerning the payment of taxes to the emperor (Mark 12:13–17). The fourth pericope concerns resurrection and uses the relationship of spouses after death as an example of resurrected life. It was addressed to Jesus by the Sadducees (Mark 12:18–27). Jesus was challenged by priests, scribes, elders, Herodians, Pharisees and Sadducees, all groups with power and influence in Jerusalem.

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<sup>72</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*.188.



The fifth pericope is unique. It is the climax of the challenges and debates between Jesus and the authorities. The discussion with the scribe was not hostile, and the issue is central to the ideology of Jesus.<sup>73</sup> For his disciples, Jesus had triumphed over the leaders of Jerusalem and stood as the new leader; one who had placed love of God and love of neighbour over all the legal requirements of the Torah. Readers know that Jesus was shortly to be killed because this was a major challenge to the status quo, to the power of the groups which challenged him.

For this exegesis, we shall use the three worlds of the text<sup>74</sup> as a framework, discussing what radical disciples learn from the various exegetical methods as they apply to these worlds. There is some overlap of methods, of course, but these may provide different insights depending on whether it is the world behind the text, the world of the text, or the world in front of the text under discussion. After the exegetical section, we shall elucidate what has been found through the lens of Gorman's adapted questions from the previous chapter.

### **World behind the text**

For the world behind the text, historical criticism and social science criticism, authorship of the Gospel, time and place of the community for which the Gospel was written, and ideology, particularly of the writer, are important exegetical tools for the radical discipleship interpretation. Given the centrality of Jesus to radical disciples, the meaning of Jesus in his place and time is important.

The world behind the text, for this particular pericope, is focussed on the Temple in Jerusalem and the scribes, and their roles in the life of the people. The Temple was the heart of the Judaism of the first century CE, and was central in the life of the people since it was built, originally by Solomon, and then restored after its destruction in 587 BCE. The Temple dominated both the society, as the centre of

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<sup>73</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strongman*, 317.

<sup>74</sup> Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*. 17; Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures Volume 2*, trans. David Pellauer, English ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013)., 14; Tate, *Handbook for Biblical Interpretation*. 473-474.

the cult, and the physical landscape of the city of Jerusalem, due to its size and magnificence. Israel was God's chosen people; God's presence was in the Temple. The identity of the people was intimately associated with the Temple and if its purity was threatened in any way, such as by the placing of images within its precincts, the people defended it fiercely.<sup>75</sup> Gentiles were not permitted beyond a certain point, on pain of death. The Temple tax was kept there, as was grain from taxation. The elite lived near the Temple, with non-elites who served the elite, providing goods and services, living further out from the centre of the city or beyond the walls.<sup>76</sup>

Scribes were important because they could read and write in a society where this was uncommon. Lee Levine states that not a great deal is known about the scribes but it is likely that they were found wherever their training was required; in the Temple, in wealthy households and businesses, providing an essential service in towns.<sup>77</sup> The scribes were considered experts in the law and its interpretation. Theissen states that a scribe, γραμματεύς, was someone who could "draw up a document".<sup>78</sup> The importance of the scriptures meant that, for the Jews, scribes had a role in interpreting and teaching the law. Some were members of the Sanhedrin (Mark 8:31); some scribes belonged to the Pharisees (Mark 2:16). It is in these roles that they challenged Jesus.

In this pericope, Jesus pronounces the *Shema*, from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This was said at least once daily by pious Jews, and was proclaimed at every synagogue gathering. The translation of the *Shema* from Hebrew is disputed.<sup>79</sup> This results

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<sup>75</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context : Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992). 8.

<sup>76</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. 56-57; 85.

<sup>77</sup> Lee I Levine, *Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period (538 B C E - 70 C E)* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002). 381-382.

<sup>78</sup> Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans., John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1998). P 225

<sup>79</sup> For example Christopher R Bruno, "A Note Pertaining to the Translation of Deut 6:4," *Vetus Testamentum* 59, no. 2 (2009); Gerald J Janzen, "On the Most Important Word in the Shema (Deuteronomy Vi 4-5)," *ibid.* XXXVII, no. 3 (1987); Judah Kraut, "Deciphering the Shema: Staircase Parallelism and the Syntax of Deuteronomy 6:4," *ibid.* 61 (2011).

in differences in translation between Bibles such as the New Revised Standard Version, the New Jerusalem Bible and the New International Version.<sup>80</sup>

In the pericope we are looking at, we see Jesus within his tradition, one that goes back to the giving of the law on Mt Sinai. The Exodus theme, of Israel coming out of exile into the Promised Land, is one which the prophets stressed in their desire for the renewal of the covenant between Israel and God.

In his context, Jesus is a charismatic Jewish holy man, prophet, teacher, preacher, healer and story-teller. In this pericope, he responds in kind to a genuine question.

### **World of the text**

<sup>28</sup>One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

France states that, since there are approximately 613 commandments in the five books of Moses, it is not at all surprising that debates about which commandments were more important were common.<sup>81</sup> These debates occurred during Jesus’ time, so the question was not unusual. Because the previous pericopae were confrontational, the reader is unsure about this one, and wonders whether the scribe was trying to trick Jesus. France posits that καλῶς (well) means more than ‘cleverly’; it also means good; the scribe was genuine in what he said and asked.<sup>82</sup> The use of the phrase πρώτη πάντων, ‘first of all’, implies that the commandment being sought is the first in order of importance. Mary Ann Beavis cites David Daube, saying that the question is one of *derek ’eres* which concerns “fundamental principles of conduct” and in this context, πρώτη

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<sup>80</sup> NRSV (version used in this thesis) “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone”; NJB “Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one, the only Yahweh”; NIV (UK) “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one”.

<sup>81</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 477.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 479.

relates to importance rather than order.<sup>83</sup> This commandment would therefore be of paramount importance to radical disciples.

Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'"

Although the question from the scribe may have been a common one, Jesus' complete answer was not. This first part of his answer is from Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and is part of the *Shema*. God is recognised as the one God, and is to be loved totally, with all that one is. As such, it was a very Jewish response to the scribe's quite reasonable question.<sup>84</sup> Jesus added "with all your mind" to the text, which is not in the Hebrew or the Septuagint versions.<sup>85</sup> Donahue and Harrington note that in the New Testament there are very few mentions of loving God; "believing, knowing and obeying" God are more common. This makes Jesus' answer unusual in the context of the New Testament, but not in the context of Judaism.<sup>86</sup>

Malina and Rohrbaugh discuss the meaning of 'love' and 'hate' to first-century Mediterranean people who were group-oriented rather than self-oriented. These words did not mean the same as they mean for individualistic western twenty-first-century people, with the societal focus on inward and personal states of mind which were unknown in antiquity. These authors state that 'love' was more like 'attachment' or 'devotion' and 'hate' more like 'disattachment' or 'indifference' than the modern meanings of these words. 'Love' implied loyalty to a group or a person.<sup>87</sup> In effect Jesus was saying 'be totally devoted and loyal to God' in every aspect of your person.

The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.

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<sup>83</sup> Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 179–80, citing David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1956), 60.

<sup>84</sup> Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 335.

<sup>85</sup> Beavis, *Mark*, 180.

<sup>86</sup> Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 355.

<sup>87</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 259–260.

Here Jesus was saying ‘be as devoted and loyal to your neighbour as you are to yourself’. This is the part of Jesus’ answer that may have surprised the scribe. It is from Leviticus 19:18. Some authors consider ‘neighbour’ was meant in a narrow sense<sup>88</sup>: some consider it was meant more broadly<sup>89</sup>. The Leviticus verse is preceded by nine verses instructing Jews in proper behaviour towards others. Verses 10–18 concern leaving some of the harvest for the poor and the alien; not stealing, lying or cheating; not showing favouritism in judging; not mistreating the blind and the mute; not slandering, not hating, not taking vengeance or bearing a grudge; and not making money “by the blood” of your neighbour. (This last term is not fully understood.) At the end of these admonishments is the positively expressed comment “you shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev 19:18). These behaviours would impact on people not considered neighbours in a narrow sense of the word; they would have impacted on all people with whom one came into contact. The scribe, and others within hearing, would have known the context of the one verse Jesus quoted, and taken this into account.

France states that the two commandments Jesus gave represent the first and second parts of the Decalogue. The commandment given first prioritises love of God: love of neighbour depends upon love of God. He says that in the First Testament, the neighbour was a “fellow member of the covenant community”. However, Luke’s version of the Greatest Commandment includes the question “who is my neighbour?” which is followed by the parable of the Good Samaritan, which includes traditional enemies as neighbours.<sup>90</sup>

Jewish law specified that aliens were to be cared for, as were widows and orphans. One of the responsibilities of scribes was to administer the estates of widows’ deceased husbands; however, this enabled the misuse and embezzlement of the widows’ funds.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 355.

<sup>89</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 317.

<sup>90</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text.*, 480–1.

<sup>91</sup> Mark 12:40.

Jesus combined the love of God and the love of neighbour into the Greatest Commandment, the one commandment which is the most important. Moloney states that this commandment has “at least two possible interpretations”.<sup>92</sup> Either it can be taken as a statement that sums up all the commandments but does not mean they do not have to be observed, or it can be taken as replacing all the other commandments. This second possible interpretation is a radical change, freeing Jews from observing all the requirements of the law. Moloney posits that it must mean the latter, as this is a logical conclusion from what has happened previously, with Jesus silencing the leaders and taking on their role. For radical disciples, the latter interpretation is more in keeping with Jesus as prophet, in terms of minimising marginalisation. Keeping all the laws is impossible for many poor Jews, those who live at a distance from Jerusalem, and possibly also some Diaspora Jews. Insisting on the ‘letter of the law’ results in marginalisation. The ‘spirit of the law’ is summed up in the commandment to love God and neighbour, and this does not result in marginalisation. For the community for whom Mark’s Gospel is written, it enables and facilitates the full membership of Gentiles.

Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’;<sup>33</sup> and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”<sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

In verses 32 and 33, the scribe responded very positively to Jesus’ answer, going so far as to say that these commandments, combined into one commandment, are more important than sacrifices and offerings.

France mentions the possibility of a link between Jesus’ use of *vouνεχῶς* (wisely) with *ἐξ ὅλης τῆς διανοίας σου* (with all your mind) and *ἐξ ὅλης τῆς συνέσεως* (with all your understanding) but considers this is far-fetched and not deliberate. It does, however, reiterate the involvement of one’s intellect in loving God

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<sup>92</sup> Francis J Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc, 2002)., 240.

completely. Perhaps the closeness of the scribe to the kingdom of God was being stressed. Now all he had to do was act: stop his involvement in the exploitation of the poor and marginalised and the interpretation of the law which mandated this, and follow Jesus.

The scribe impressed Jesus with his answer, as Jesus' response indicates. However, the scribe was not quite there yet. He needed to take the next step and follow Jesus. Vicky Balabanski states: "God's rule invades earthly rule through a person's consciously taking it on".<sup>93</sup> In Mark 10:15 Jesus told the rich man who wished to enter the kingdom that he could do this by selling everything, giving the proceeds to the poor, and following him, Jesus. Following Jesus is essential to entering the kingdom. The scribe could see that loving God and loving neighbour are more important than sacrifices and offerings to God, but the question was whether he might go further than this. Might he be interested in joining Jesus' group?

For France, the pericope denotes "a significant turning point" in the challenges to Jesus. Scribes have been Jesus' enemies since his early ministry in Galilee,<sup>94</sup> so it is surprising that one of them questions Jesus in a non-threatening manner. France states "One open minded scribe symbolises what might have been, but he stands alone".<sup>95</sup> At the end of the pericope, Jesus has silenced those who have challenged him. For France, the linking of the two Hebrew Bible texts is also surprising, stating that there is no Jewish precedent for "the explicit linking of these two very familiar OT texts."<sup>96</sup> Moloney describes what has occurred as Jesus reducing each of the questioning groups "to silence", one group at a time, until all the leaders of Israel are silenced.<sup>97</sup>

Jesus silenced all those who challenged him. In the scriptural debates, he outwitted his challengers with his arguments. In the parable of the tenants he

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<sup>93</sup> Vicky Balabanski, *Eschatology in the Making: Mark, Matthew and the Didache* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). 150.

<sup>94</sup> Mark 2: 6-7.

<sup>95</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. 476.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 477-8.

<sup>97</sup> Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary*. 229.

spoke as a prophet, reflecting their behaviour back to his challengers, calling on them to change.<sup>98</sup> He expressed, in no uncertain terms, what is required to be part of the kingdom, what is required to be a disciple. This is to follow Jesus.

### **World in front of the text**

This is the contemporary world as seen through the lens of solidarity with the marginalised. The focus of this pericope is the Greatest Commandment; the preceding pericopae have built up to this. Radical disciples are aware that this commandment of Jesus is not being followed to the extent that it should, and know that if it was being followed, there would be a great deal fewer marginalised people. Those people who are marginalised and who know about Jesus and the modern Christian church would also be aware of this. The text challenges radical disciples to act on what Jesus says. Loving all people as neighbours, even opponents, is the way of Jesus and the way of God. It is the way to progress the *missio Dei*.

“Embodiment or actualisation”<sup>99</sup> – becoming like Jesus – is essential for radical disciples, and this pericope, which Myers states is central to Jesus’ ideology<sup>100</sup>, is therefore of paramount importance. In order to learn how to love, how to live out love, radical disciples will use other ideological perspectives such as postcolonialism, feminism, and liberation theology.

Radical disciples who are not sure who can be considered their neighbour can make use of other biblical texts, such as the Greatest Commandment and the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke’s gospel (Luke 10:25-37) to clarify this.

### **Building a hermeneutical bridge**

Jesus called loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbours as we love ourselves the greatest commandment: one commandment, not two. He gave the two instructions equal weight. He told the scribe that he was not far from the

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<sup>98</sup> For example, Amos 5:11-15; Isaiah 55:6-7.

<sup>99</sup> Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis.*, 160.

<sup>100</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strongman*, 317.



kingdom. For radical disciples the question that remains is why isn't the scribe there already? The answer is that following Jesus is essential to entering the kingdom. Saying you love God and neighbour is not sufficient. Love requires action. Love requires the action of following Jesus on the way of doing justice. Justice is love in action.

The *missio Dei*, the reconciliation of all creation, to all creation and to God, can only be achieved by the authentic and whole-hearted love of God and neighbour, and by the authentic and whole-hearted following of Jesus.

What is it that got Jesus crucified by the powerful? He spoke up about injustice to them. He promoted an alternative kingdom to that of the empire, and he told the powerful that they could not enter the kingdom of God unless they did something to end injustice; the injustice that they were meting out to their fellow Jews, to the poor, to widows, to peasants. It is not possible to exploit people and give them justice at the same time.

There is no doubt that the question 'who is my neighbour?' is very important for radical disciples, as well as other Christians. We live in a 'global village' and are aware that we are all interconnected; what we do affects people all over the planet. For radical disciples, everyone, everywhere, is a neighbour. This means that we are to love all people as we love ourselves.

The first of Gorman's adapted questions (above) concerns God's mission as revealed by Jesus. By telling the scribe that the greatest commandment is to love the one God with all our being and to love our neighbour as ourselves, Jesus revealed that God's mission includes reconciliation. The second question is in part answered by the interaction of the scribe and Jesus, which is respectful. Loving God and neighbour removes the option to act confrontationally or violently towards, or discriminate against, others, despite their past actions; behaviour that is as difficult today as it has always been. The third question asks about the purpose of the disciples: Jesus' disciples and today's radical disciples learn the importance and meaning of following Jesus: this is how one enters

God's kingdom. In this Jesus' disciples were an example to others, as are modern disciples when they follow Jesus. This text brings together all of the commandments into one, all of the Scriptures into a few verses (question four). In answer to the final question, radical disciples read the text to learn how to act as Jesus acted and taught. The text is about loving God and loving others; loving others makes disciples vulnerable to the pain of others. Loving God and loving others is what it means to be fully human and a full participant in the *missio Dei*.

In this chapter I have undertaken an exegesis of the Greatest Commandment, using the tools described in the previous chapter. This pericope is very important to twenty-first-century radical disciples, succinctly summing up all the commandments into one which is foundational for those called to follow Jesus of Nazareth.

## Chapter 5

### Radical discipleship in action: brief case study of #LoveMakesAWay

Love Makes A Way is a movement of radical discipleship, based in part upon the Greatest Commandment. It has grown in reaction to government policy concerning asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat, which consigns them to off-shore detention, and results in people being kept indefinitely in dehumanising conditions. This is a policy supported by many Australians: asylum seekers are often labelled “illegals” and “queue jumpers,” despite the legality of their actions, and our common humanity.

It is a fundamental tenet of the Love Makes A Way movement that asylum seekers are our neighbours. This is based upon the radical disciple interpretation of the Greatest Commandment and the parable of the Good Samaritan: all people are our neighbours and we are to care for them as the Samaritan cared for the injured traveller. The government attempts to depict these asylum seekers as the “other” who have no claim upon Australians whereas Love Makes A Way asserts that they have a legitimate claim as our neighbours.

Love Makes A Way uses the non-violent direct action principles and methods of Martin Luther King Jr and his colleagues to design and carry out activities of civil disobedience with the aim of producing a change in government policy, and freeing children and families from off-shore detention. The name of the movement comes from Martin Luther King Jr, who wrote “darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”<sup>101</sup>

Two statements from young Christian leaders involved in the development of the movement and in its actions are evidence of the centrality of Jesus and the

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<sup>101</sup> Martin Luther Jr King and James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Rowe, 1986).

Greatest Commandment to the group. One of those involved in an early action, Justin Whelan, stated: “We try to heed the call to love our neighbours as ourselves, to stand up for the oppressed, and to welcome the stranger.”

Referring to the indefinite detention of asylum seekers, Jarrod McKenna, one of the Christian leaders in the movement, states: “It is my conviction that Christian faith should look like Christ, not his crucifiers.”<sup>102</sup> These young leaders are acting as modern prophets in their statements and their actions.

The activities of the movement have brought attention to the plight of asylum seekers and have given a voice to those wanting to take a stand against the government’s policy, and actions in which they can participate. Some of the actions have the possible consequence of arrest and charge for participants. Individuals, churches, the public, the police and magistrates have responded, mostly positively, to the actions.

There have been diverse actions, ranging from prayer vigils in parliamentarians’ offices to physically blocking access to a hospital to prevent asylum-seeker patients from being removed and sent to detention on Nauru or Manus Island. Although some states in Australia are moving to make such protests illegal, it is likely that the actions will continue, and the number of those involved will increase, as followers of Jesus support each other to speak the truth to the powerful concerning policies that are marginalising, and damaging, people.

Love Makes A Way bases its actions on the fundamental teachings of Jesus and on the prophetic concern for the marginalised. Those involved in actions have accepted the call to follow Jesus, and are prepared for the possible consequences. It is thus a radical discipleship movement as defined in this thesis, bringing together both aspects of such discipleship.

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<sup>102</sup> All of the quotations from participants are from articles available here: <https://flipboard.com/@lovemakesaway/articles-by-lmaw-j7vfqg01y>.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

In this thesis I have defined radical discipleship, developed a radical discipleship hermeneutic, used that hermeneutic in an exegesis of Mark 12:28–34, and presented a brief case study of the Love Makes A Way movement's campaign to end off-shore detention of those seeking asylum in Australia by boat.

Modern Christians and modern churches sometimes struggle with theology that, although it grew out of important issues in the past, seems irrelevant and even a barrier to Christian living today. Doctrine can get in the way, telling people what they should believe and judging people who question or have doubts about the theology. Following Jesus as the foundation of Christianity, basing our lives on what he taught and how he lived, and tempering that by the commandment to love all people will go a long way to reducing marginalisation and ensuring that no new groups are marginalised. It is what Jesus said concerning justice, what he said as a prophet, that is of greatest interest to radical disciples, whose passion is for justice. The foundation of justice, for radical disciples, is love, and the axiom "justice is love in action" is paramount.

Radical disciples come to their passion for justice via their love of God and of Jesus as the revelation of God. Love of God, for radical disciples, inevitably results in love of neighbour, and the neighbour is each and every person.

The Greatest Commandment, which is about loving God completely, and loving one's neighbour, caring for one's neighbour as one cares for oneself, encapsulates what being a radical disciple, and indeed a Christian, is about. It is time that both churches and individual Christians took Jesus at his word and lived

accordingly. In John Hirt's words, "the church exists not for its own sake: it exists for the *missio Dei*".<sup>103</sup> He continues:

Despite the verbalised concern for dignity and justice, within the constituency of church membership broad commitment and identification with the needs of the weak and helpless is limited. Sadly the church's politics and language have contributed to oppression, either by defining the theological task independently of, or opposed to, marginalised races, sexually despised people, and exploited classes, rather than realising that what is needed is the church's discipleship in the radical reinterpretation of human existence.<sup>104</sup>

I am fortunate to belong to a faith community where the people take this seriously, but many churches and people do not. I consider that, if churches do not take this seriously, if they are not there for the *missio Dei*, they are not following Jesus; they are not taking up Jesus' call and invitation to be part of the kingdom. Reading the Bible with a radical discipleship hermeneutic assists in the understanding of what it means truly to follow Jesus, as he lived and taught, for modern followers.

Living by the commandment to act out of love necessarily entails learning how to love. We cannot assume that we know what is best for others. We need to understand that our actions or words may have unwanted consequences. We cannot fully act out of love for others if we do not know that our culture of consumerism and individualism sustains itself at the expense of the vast majority of the people of the world. We cannot fully act out of love for others if we do not know how the nations of the world behave towards other nations and their people. And we cannot act out of love if we do not understand how our way of being in the world, capitalism, exploits the entire ecosystem, including people.

The First, or Greatest, Commandment provides us with a benchmark but also asks something from us: action. The benchmark is perhaps the easy part: the action is more difficult. Radical discipleship, with its emphasis on getting back to Jesus' teaching and example, and its requirement to be socially and politically

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<sup>103</sup> Hirt, "Radical Discipleship: "Towards the Theology and Socio-Political Implications".", 337.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 340.

aware, can provide us with the answer to the question: how should we love? If justice is love in action, we love by demanding, and working towards, justice for our neighbours. To do this, we must be prepared to understand and face injustice in the world.

## Appendix 1

This is a list of the authors and works cited on Page 5 of this thesis. The works here are not included in the Bibliography unless cited elsewhere in the thesis.

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