



A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON COVID-19 Suffering Christ and the Paradigm of Discipleship in Mark 9:36-37

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Abstract

This article seeks to answer the question, “Where is God in the midst of suffering?”, through reflecting on the paradigm of discipleship in Mark 9:36-37. Welcoming a child is a parabolic action done by Christ to show that the way to be the greatest is to welcome the weakest or to be the servant of all. A child is used as a paradigm due to his or her low status in the Greco-Roman society. Children had no right, seen as properties rather than persons, and thus equated to slaves. Therefore, welcoming a child means welcoming the weakest of the society, and doing so means to welcome Christ himself and the one who sent him. The suffering caused by COVID-19 makes the whole world suffer, yet it also creates a bigger gap between the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak. A reflection on the paradigm invites Christians to side with the weakest and those who are in need, hoping that the kingdom of God will be ushered into this suffering world.

Keywords

Discipleship, Theological Reflection, COVID-19, Suffering, Gospel of Mark

Abstrak

Artikel ini adalah upaya untuk menjawab pertanyaan, “Di manakah Allah di tengah penderitaan?” melalui perenungan terhadap suatu model pemuridan yang berdasarkan paradigma pemuridan di dalam Markus 9:36-37. Menyambut seorang anak kecil merupakan suatu tindakan perumpamaan yang dilakukan Kristus guna menunjukkan bahwa cara untuk menjadi yang terbesar adalah untuk menyambut mereka yang lemah atau untuk menjadi hamba bagi sesama. Seorang anak digunakan sebagai paradigma

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sehubungan dengan status sosialnya yang rendah di tengah masyarakat Greko-Romawi. Anak dianggap tidak memiliki hak, dilihat sebagai properti ketimbang pribadi, dan dengan demikian dapat disetarakan dengan budak. Maka menyambut seorang anak berarti menyambut mereka yang paling lemah di tengah masyarakat, dan melakukannya berarti menyambut Kristus sendiri dan Dia yang telah mengutus Kristus. Dampak global dari COVID-19 membuat kesenjangan sosial di antara yang kaya dan yang miskin dan yang kuat dan yang lemah menjadi semakin besar. Suatu perenungan terhadap paradigma pemuridan tersebut mengajak umat Kristen untuk berpihak kepada yang lemah dan mereka yang membutuhkan, dengan harapan bahwa melalui tindakan tersebut, kerajaan Allah akan disambut ke dalam dunia yang sedang menderita.

Kata-kata Kunci

Pemuridan, Refleksi Teologis, COVID-19, Penderitaan, Injil Markus

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 or Coronavirus disease is infectious and caused by the newly discovered coronavirus. Most infected people experience respiratory illness, and the virus primarily spreads “through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs and sneezes.”² And until now, vaccines or special treatments for COVID-19 is unavailable. Tabb provides an excellent global overview of the COVID-19 pandemic:

On 31 December 2019, Chinese health officials reported cases of serious respiratory sickness in people associated with a large market in Wuhan, China. This outbreak was soon linked to a “novel coronavirus” (later given the innocuous name “COVID-19”), and the World Health Organization declared “a global public health emergence” due to the deadly virus. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as “a pandemic,” with confirmed cases of the virus in well over 100 countries, thousands of confirmed deaths, and thousands of new cases being reported each day. The Center for Disease Control ominously warns that there is “no vaccine to protect against COVID-19” and “no specific antiviral treatment for COVID-19” ... The global spread of the coronavirus prompted nationwide lockdowns in Italy and other countries, severe travel restrictions, closures to schools and business, and cancelations of major sporting events

2 “Coronavirus” in https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1, accessed on June 8, 2020.

... Churches on multiple continents have even been forced to cancel or modify corporate worship services.³

Since the pandemic has affected over 100 countries, the suffering it causes is universal in nature. It could be said that the world is suffering and that the threat of COVID-19 is sort of a death threat to all humanity. That also works from the economic sector, as per January, the World Economic Forum states that global income is expected to grow by 3 percent, but after COVID-19, it is predicted to fall by 3 percent, that would be much worse than the Great Recession of 2008-09. Thus, “The COVID-19 crisis is now widely seen as the greatest economic calamity since the Great Depression.” For the poor, the pandemic will give them further disadvantages, especially concerning income inequality and decreasing employment of people with basic education.⁴ There is a massive growth of social inequality that could also be seen from daily life observations: some people are unable to work from home so they are more exposed to the virus; some are losing their job or able to maintain their job with their salary cut; some people do not even have internet access so they cannot attend online church services or any forms of only education; not to mention those who do not even have electricity and perhaps have no means to obtain the information concerning the pandemic.

At this moment it is fruitful for us to revisit the question, “Where is God in the midst of suffering?” According to the theology of the Gospel of Mark, Christ’s main task is to bring the Kingdom of God into the world, and he did so through suffering. The child was used as a paradigm of discipleship by Christ to the disciples so they might understand that to be the greatest is to be the servant of all. A child was used as a paradigm because children had the lowest status in Greco-Roman society. They had no right at all, and thus equaled to slaves. For Jesus, welcoming a child — which represents the weakest of the society — means welcoming him and the one who sent him. This article argues that the usage of a child as discipleship paradigm has spiritual and social implications: it calls Christians

3 Brian J. Tabb, “Editorial: Theological Reflections on the Pandemic” in *Themelios* 45.1: 2020, 1-2.

4 “The Pandemic Will Leave the Poor further Disadvantaged - IMF”, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/pandemics-poor-rich-economics-coronavirus-covid19>, accessed on June 8, 2020.

to reflect on how the kingdom of God comes through the suffering of Christ and challenges Christians to welcome the weakest among the society, for by doing so Christians are welcoming the kingdom of God into the world. Instead of doubting or questioning God's existence, Christians should usher the kingdom of God into the suffering world through living out the discipleship paradigm that Christ has taught.

Toward that purpose, this paper will first deal with the historical and literary context of the Gospel of Mark; second, elaborate the usage of a child as paradigm of discipleship in Mark 9:36-37; third, draw the spiritual and social implications of the discipleship paradigm for COVID-19 situation; and fourth, end in a conclusion.

THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Suffering was the background of the Gospel of Mark. Many believers were killed in Rome. And it was the Neronian holocaust that the Church experienced. They had been burned by Nero and two Church's foremost figures (Peter and Paul) had been executed. Soon after the hardship, a small book called the Gospel of Mark was written to remind them of Jesus' nature as the Messiah (God's suffering servant) and to encourage the cross-bearing discipleship.⁵

The most plausible scenario is that the Gospel of Mark was written to the church of Rome. It tells the story of Jesus from his baptism to his resurrection: around two-third tells about his ministry in Galilee, and the last third narrates his final week in Jerusalem. According to Papias, it was written to the church of Rome by c. AD 65. The content emphasizes the kingdom of God that comes with Jesus through the new exodus promised in Isaiah, how the kingly Messiah came in weakness, keeping his identity in secret; how the new exodus leads to Jesus' death in Jerusalem; and the way of discipleship through taking up the cross and follow him.⁶

The author of the Gospel of Mark does not identify himself in his work. However, there are few accounts on it from the early tradition.

5 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 278.

6 Fee, *How to Read the Bible*, 277.

Papias, bishop of Hierapolis of the Asia province considers Mark not as an eyewitness but as the interpreter of Peter. Even though he testifies that Mark did not wrong on writing everything he heard from Peter about Christ, he criticizes Mark for the lack of arrangement of his book.⁷ Apart from Papias, attestations to the view that Mark wrote the Gospel comes from some early sources as follow:

Anti-Marcionite Prologue (c. AD 150-180), Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 106.4 (c. AD 150), Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3.I.I. (c. AD 170), Clement of Alexandria in Eusebius, *Historica ecclesiastica* 6.14.6-7 (c. AD 180), Origen, in Eusebius, *Historica ecclesiastica* 6.25.5 (c. AD 200), Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 4.5 (c. AD 200), Eusebius, *Historica Ecclesiastica* 2.16-17 (c. AD 324) and Jerome, *Commentariorum in Matthaeum*, Prologue 6 (c. AD 400).⁸

The reference of Papias and the other Early Church Fathers to “Mark” (in Lat. Marcus and Gk. Markos) rather than to “John Mark” indicates that the name must be of a slave or a non-Roman citizen. Among the Jews, the evidence only attests seven Jews with the name “Mark”. Jewish Christian leaders and teachers thus infer that the name might only refer to one Mark, which is the John Mark of Acts. The author is aware of Jewish customs and religious groups (7:1-5; 14:12; 15:42), employs Aramaic terms (3:17, 22; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 9:43; 10:46; 15:22, 34), and also Jewish technical terms (7:11). It demonstrates his knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic which fits John Mark of Acts who comes from Jerusalem. Furthermore, Maurice Casey argues that major parts of Mark’s Gospel are translation from Aramaic. The pile of evidence leads Schnabel to conclude, “The author of the Gospel of Mark is most plausibly regarded as a Jewish Christian.”⁹

Mark’s literary style is heavily narrative, attempting to convey the feeling of a fast-moving action. He has a simple and unsophisticated Greek style, using many simple sentences with the conjunction “and”. A comparison of events found in Mark and other Gospels will show how Mark is often

7 Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Mark*, Vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2017), 10.

8 Schnabel, *Tyndale*, 10-11.

9 In the book of Acts, the person “Mark” is a Jewish Christian from Jerusalem and is associated with Barnabas (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37, 39); Schnabel, *Tyndale*, 11-12.

wordy and less well constructed. Nevertheless, Mark employed certain techniques that demonstrate his literary intent and skill. He sometimes cites but more frequently alludes to the Old Testament, perhaps with the expectation that his readers are sufficiently familiar with such allusions. For Mark and his readers, the Old Testament was seen as the holy Scripture that foreshadows Jesus's work. Mark sometimes connects two stories by attaching one another, perhaps he intends to use the two stories to explain each other. Sometimes author also groups the stories in making a sustained point, such as in 2:1-3:6. And sometimes uses a quite large amount of material, as in how the author handles chapters 8-10.¹⁰

Due to Mark's narrative literary style, it is important to see how Mark 9:33-37 is related to the whole stories in the Gospel of Mark, its relationship to the sections of bigger stories in Mark, and its relationship to the sub-sections it is in. The big picture is that the Gospel of Mark can be divided into two sections: section one, "ministry of healing and preaching in Galilee (1:1-8:26)"; and section two, "suffering predicted, death in Jerusalem, resurrection" (8:27-16:8 + 16:9-20).¹¹ To be more specific, Mark 9:33-37 is located around three predictions of Jesus's suffering and death. Mark 9:30-32 tells about a journey through Galilee that starts with Jesus's second prediction of his death (9:30-32), yet the disciples do not understand as they did not in the first prediction. Due to their dullness, "Jesus gives his disciples varied instruction pertinent to the kingdom (9:33-10:31).¹² Thus, the discipleship paradigm in Mark 9:36-37 is both instruction for Christ's disciples and explanation of Jesus's own ministry paradigm, which he came to suffer and die at the cross.

THE USAGE OF A CHILD AS PARADIGM OF DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK 9:36-37

The context of Mark 9:36-37 is about the disciples' quarrel about who is the greatest among them. Mark 9:33-37 tells the fuller story:

10 Larry W. Hurtado, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series: Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 11–12.

11 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament: The Abridged Edition*, ed. Marion L. Soards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 45.

12 Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 51.

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”¹³

The passage shows how Jesus juxtaposes “welcomes one of these little children”, to “be the very last”, and “the servant of all”. And those descriptions could be taken altogether as the means to be the “first” or the “greatest”. That is to say that instead of rebuking the disciples’ desire to be the “first” or the “greatest” among all, Jesus shows them the way. As the Reformation Bible Study puts it, “Jesus is not attacking leadership positions, but showing the way in which such roles should be exercised.”¹⁴ Within this context, the child is used as a paradigm of discipleship as an instruction on how to be the “first” or the “greatest”.

To understand the paradigm deeper, there are some keywords that have to be examined. Those words are the “child”, “welcomes”, “last” and “first”. The word “child” (*παιδίον*) signifies someone’s age. It is usually used to describe “a very young child up to seven years”. And the word “welcomes” (*δέχομαι*) literally means “receive” or to be more specific, within the context of Mark 9:37, it means “to be receptive of someone”. The word “last” (*ἔσχατος*) means “last, least, the most insignificant”. And the word “first” (*πρῶτος*) means “prominence, first, foremost, most important, most prominent.”¹⁵ Thus, it could be inferred that the disciples’ quarrel to be the “greatest” is to be the “most prominent” among others. But why is “a child” within this story being associated with the last, least, or the most insignificant? C. Reeder explains:

13 Mark 9:33-37, NIV.

14 R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), p. 1754.

15 Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature (BDAG)*, 3rd Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 749, p. 221, pp. 397-98, p. 892.

Children in Greco-Roman antiquity faced the likelihood of violence and sexual abuse. Infancy was a particularly dangerous period of life due to the threat of exposure in the Roman Empire (though not, according to numerous sources, for Jewish children [see e.g. Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.202]). The child's father or, if unmarried, the mother had the legal right to choose to raise a child or abandon it in a public space (a temple, garbage dump, doorway, etc. [cf. P. Oxy. 744]).¹⁶

In the Greco-Roman antiquity, a child had no right to live on his or her own self. The life of a child was absolutely dependent on the decision of the parents. In the Jewish antiquity, a child might perhaps have a better life than in the Greco-Roman world, but it was still far from a high view of a child as in the present time. Albrecht Oepke wrote, "At most an odd Talmud anecdote might tell of a scholar spending time with a child, but this is regarded as a waste of time."¹⁷ Children were classified by the rabbis with those who are with disabilities (dumb or deaf), the weak-minded, and slaves. Even among the Jews children were considered not as full persons but somehow as property.¹⁸ In that sense, a child fits the description of being the last, least, or the most insignificant.

Within Mark's broader narrative, this discipleship paradigm forms an important literary frame to illustrate the true discipleship around Jesus's "three predictions of his passion and death (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34)."¹⁹ Thus, the paradigm acts as both the paradigm of the true discipleship for the disciples, but at the same time, it serves as Jesus' own ministry paradigm. Jesus did not come to be served, but to be a servant to all. Furthermore, he is to bring God's glorious Kingdom to this world through his suffering and death (9:31).

16 C. Reeder, "Child, Children", in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, 2nd Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 110.

17 Albrecht Oepke, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 646.

18 Clinton E. Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 260.

19 Joseph A. Grassi, "Child, Children", in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 905.

Jesus teaches that to be the first, the disciples must be the last and thus to be servant of all (9:35). The “parabolic action” of verse 36 intensifies Jesus’s teaching to become “the servant of all”. And finally, Jesus associates himself with the position of the servant, in his surprising declaration that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (10:45).²⁰ Due to their helplessness and their low status in the society, young children here are juxtaposed to slaves and thus to Christ himself (Mk. 10:45; Lk. 22:24-27).²¹ That matches the ancient protocol that sees children in equal to slaves and all the subordinate members of the household of the antiquity, they “were to serve the male head of the household.”²² But what does it means to be a servant? Edwards elaborates further:

The word for servant is *diakonos*, the ordinary Greek word for waiting tables (Luke 17:8; John 12:2; Acts 6:2) ... The Greek world generally considered service demeaning and undignified: “How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?” (Plato, *Gorgias* 491e) expressed the basic Greek attitude toward service and servants. In Jesus’ teaching, to the contrary, the concept of service grows out of his concept of love for one’s neighbor. Jesus’s selfless service of others fills the concept of servant with entirely new content; the posture of the servant is visible manifestation of the reality of God’s love.²³

By emphasizing the importance of servanthood, Christ was being counter-culture of his time. Instead of seeing an act of service as “demeaning” and “undignified”, Christ chooses it as to display the manifestation of God’s love. The concern of the Gospel of Mark is to depict the cross as the main task of Jesus but also for the pattern of discipleship. Mark 8-10 depicts Jesus’ own coming sufferings as his essential task, but also as a paradigm of discipleship, which calls his disciples to follow his example. Christ’s disciples is not to live an easy or triumphant life, but to

20 William L. Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to Mark*, ed. Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 341.

21 Reeder, *Dictionary of Jesus*, 111.

22 Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 270.

23 James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 287.

center oneself in the suffering Messiah for the sake of others.²⁴ Strauss aptly summarizes Mark's christological transition: "Jesus is the mighty Messiah and the Son of God (1:1-8:30), but his role is that of the Suffering Servant of the Lord, who offers himself as a ransom for sins (8:31-15:47)."²⁵

Unfortunately, Mark's account of Jesus's sacrificial death shows how the disciples failed to get the message of Christ and thus perplexed by the cross. Ironically, Mark compares the disciples' incapability to see the glory of the cross with the story of a gentile centurion who confessed that Christ is the son of God after seeing Christ's crucifixion (15:39).

THE SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DISCIPLESHIP PARADIGM

Then how can we see the glory of God amidst suffering? I. Howard Marshall concludes the main theme of the Gospel of Mark:

The main theme of the Gospel is the identity of Jesus in his relationship to the kingdom of God. Mark spells this out in two stages. There is first the recognition of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, with the evidence of the presence of the kingdom in and through the mighty works and his proclamation. Then there is the recognition that the Messiah must suffer and be raised from the dead, with the implications that this has for his followers. *The kingdom will not come without suffering on the part of the Messiah and those who share in his task.*²⁶

Based on the theology of the Gospel of Mark there are at least two points offered to answer that question: first, it is important to see that Christ's main task is to bring the Kingdom of God into the earth, and how he did so through suffering; and second, all of his disciples are to partake in that task. The former will be treated as the "spiritual implications" and the latter the "social implications". This article will seek to elaborate those points more

24 Hurtado, *Understanding the Bible*, 11.

25 Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 403.

26 Emphasis is mine; I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 91.

specifically from the perspective of the discipleship paradigm in Mark 9:36-37 and attempt to apply it in the context of suffering caused by COVID-19.

Spiritual Implications:

The Coming of God's Kingdom through the Suffering Christ

The task of Christ is to bring the glorious kingdom of God into the world through suffering. That means the fact that the world is suffering does not hinder that task to be fulfilled, instead, suffering serves as its very means. The problem presented in Mark is not the absence of God's glory amidst suffering, but the fact the disciples are unable to see it. Keener explains:

A related theme in Mark is the failure of the disciples. Ancient writings would often play down the sensibility of secondary characters to make them foils for the main hero; characters's blindness also was used to heighten tragic elements. In Mark, the disciples are obtuse with regard to Jesus's and their own mission, both the charismatic part (miracle working—4:40; 9:18-19, 28-29) and, more significantly, the suffering part. The narrative example of their denseness contrasts so forcefully with Jesus's repeated calls to total commitment that they almost serve the literary function of comic relief in the narrative. This theme is so pervasive that the gospel apparently ends on this note (16:7-8).²⁷

It is appalling to see how the disciples failed to see God's glory through Christ suffering, even though Christ had given them three predictions of his suffering with many further instructions. The Gospel of Mark calls the readers not to repeat the failure of the disciples, but to heed Christ's repeated calls to a total commitment. Instead of doubting God's presence amidst of suffering caused by COVID-19 pandemic, Christians are called to be like the centurion — though he was a gentile and not among the disciples — he sincerely confessed that Christ is the Son of God after seeing him suffered at the cross (15:39).

The usage of a child as discipleship paradigm teaches Christ's disciples then and now that, "Greatness in God's economy is not reserved for the gifted and privileged; rather, it presents itself to every believer in

27 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 134.

the common and simple tasks of serving others.”²⁸ How God shows his greatness might be very counter-culture, but that is the way that Christ himself had gone through. Through his death and suffering, Christ shows how he came not to be served but to serve, and thus revealing the glory of God. So where is God in the midst of suffering? His glorious presence is always there, the question is whether we as disciples of Christ are able to see it.

Social Implications: Partaking in Christ’s Kingdom Ministry

The discipleship paradigm in Mark 9:36-37 was Christ’s answer to the question of who was the greatest the disciples. It was an answer to the question of leadership, organization, social status, or simply, it was Christ’s answer to a social question. Thus, it is very important to catch the social implication of the paradigm.

A child was employed by Christ as a paradigm of discipleship due to their lowest status in the society. That is to affirm his teaching that, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” (9:35). Since the whole world is suffering from COVID-19, there is a massive need for people with serving hearts. The world has more places to clean, more regulations to keep, and more people to support. Through this paradigm Christians are called one more time to serve everyone by every means. As Edwards puts it, “Service to others is the primary way in which believers imitate and fulfill the mission of Jesus (10:43-45).”²⁹

To apply the social implication of the discipleship paradigm to the social problem caused by COVID-19 pandemic is to adhere to Christ’s call to welcome a little child in his name. A name represents the person that bears the name. Therefore, to welcome someone “in my name” could mean “for my sake”, “as my representative”, or also “with my authority”. The picture that displayed here is an emissary sent by the king. Therefore, welcoming “a child” as an emissary means to be at the service of the king himself. And as noted earlier, a child serves as a symbol of the least, the most insignificant, or the weakest of the society. Thus to welcome a child means to welcome those who are weakest among all, and by doing that, we are at service to God himself. It is very common for the people to desire

28 Edwards, *The Gospel*, 287.

29 Edwards, *The Gospel*, 287.

association with those who are strongest in the society. But this paradigm calls all disciples of Christ to associate themselves with the weakest, as Christ did. By taking the child's arm, Jesus "is acting out a parable on what it means to be great."³⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic is in a sense bring all humans into one universal humanity since its deadly effect could indiscriminately target any people regardless of social status. The pandemic is such a death threat to all humans. However, it is clear that the pandemic successfully creates a wider gap between the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak. Those who are richer are relatively safer than the poorer. People who have more food are relatively safer than those who have less. Those who have to go to work are more exposed to the virus than those who could work from home. But who are the weakest of our society? It is beyond the scope of this article to define who are the weakest. Suffice here to invite the readers to see through the paradigm of discipleship, thus they would be encouraged to side with those they discerned as the weakest and help those who are in need. Besides, it is not that hard to see who is really in need amidst this very critical situation. In so doing, Christians are seeking a way of true servant leadership, as Strauss notes, "True servant leadership flips social hierarchy on its head, lifting up and serving those of lower status in the eyes of the world."³¹

CONCLUSION

First, disciples of Christ should not allow the suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to be a hindrance for them to see God's glory. The whole life of Christ is the life of the suffering Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve. Christ fulfilled his task through his suffering at the cross. As we meditate on the cross, Christians must believe that the present suffering world is the place in which God's glory will be displayed. According to the theology of the Gospel of Mark, God's glory is clearly revealed at the cross, but the question is whether Christ's disciples are able to see it or not. We should be like the centurion who confessed that

30 Craig A. Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 34B: Mark 8:27–16:20* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 61.

31 Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary*, 410.

Christ is the Son of God while looking at Christ's atoning death and thus avoid the failure of the apostles to grasp God's glorious works through the suffering Christ.

Second, despite its rich spiritual significance, using a child as discipleship paradigm has strong social implications due to its original context. It was given by Christ as an instruction on how to be the leader, or the greatest among all. Christ commends a paradigm of servant-leadership through the parabolic action of welcoming a child, which means for us to welcome the weakest of the society. We are to side with them and serve them by all means in time of needs. It is natural for people to desire association with the strongest, but the Christian way to be the greatest is to side with the last, the least, or the most insignificant. By welcoming the weakest, we are welcoming Christ himself, even the one who sent him. That is how to welcome the glorious kingdom of God into this suffering world according to the discipleship paradigm in Mark 9:36-37.

Third, to implement the paradigm to the church ministry context is to create discipleship programs that attempt to instill the spirit of welcoming the weakest. Church discipleship programs should not be reduced to spiritual aspects per se, instead it should be expressed in the public sphere. The discipleship programs might be varied, depending on the ministry context, and even the discernment of who are the weakest among our society might be varied. However, Christians should have the same motivation in terms of willingness to be the servant of all, and to side with the weakest, the last, the least, or the most insignificant. May God help us to love the weakest as we pray for His kingdom to be manifested in our suffering world.

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