

## JESUS' PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY: A STUDY OF A FIGURE OF SPEECH IN MARK 1:38

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Figurative language is one of the more troublesome aspects of Biblical exegesis. How easier it would be if all of language were one-dimensional! Since this is not the case, however, the Biblical scholar is obligated to grapple with figures of speech in order to disclose meaning.

Although figurative language poses problems even to the most diligent students of Scripture, it can also provide a key to unlock truth and radiate light. Mark 1:38 contains such a figurative expression. From it we conclude (1) that Mark 1:21-45 is a unity, (2) that Christ had a well-defined philosophy of ministry, and (3) that Christ was in a constant fight to maintain his philosophy of ministry.

Jesus' use of the word translated "I came out" (*exēlthōn*) in Mark 1:38 is an example of amphibologia. Bullinger defines this figure of speech as "a statement which . . . has two meanings, both of which are absolutely true."<sup>1</sup>

The first meaning of *exēlthōn* in Mark 1:38 is contextually clear. The word is in an explanatory clause highlighting the preaching purpose for which Christ had come. Jesus was sent on a divine mission, as Luke's parallel narrative emphasizes: "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43).<sup>2</sup>

The second meaning of *exēlthōn* is also contextually clear, but the context includes vv 21-39. Within these verses are three distinct pericopes. First, vv 21-28 describe Jesus' Sabbath ministry in the synagogue at Capernaum. Central to this pericope is Jesus' teaching (vv 21-22, 27). The focus might well be the exclamation of the people: "A new teaching with authority!" (v 27).

Second, vv 29-34 narrate Jesus' activities on the same day. Jesus is expected to heal Peter's mother-in-law and the ill people of the city. He did so without hesitation.

Third, vv 35-39 describe Jesus' activities early the following morning. He rose perhaps as early as 3:00 a.m. and prayed.<sup>3</sup> When the disciples rose from sleep and discovered that Jesus was gone, they searched for him and found him in a deserted place. In response to the statement that all people were looking for him, Jesus declared that he must

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<sup>1</sup>E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1968) 804.

<sup>2</sup>E. P. Gould, *Gospel According to St. Mark* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, reprint 1969) 29. Gould's objection appears to be strained in light of Luke's narrative.

<sup>3</sup>Gould, *Mark*, p. 28.

leave the vicinity. He departed to preach and heal throughout Galilee.

These three pericopes can be viewed thematically centering on the balance of Jesus' two-pronged ministry. The first describes Jesus' ministry of preaching and healing. The second reveals the people's successful attempts to limit Jesus' ministry to healing. The third pictures Jesus' escape from Capernaum so that he could continue preaching as well as healing. Verse 39 reflects Jesus' two-pronged ministry once again in balance.

The amphibologia of v 38 can be stated this way: Jesus declared that "he came out from heaven" to preach (meaning number one); and to be able to continue his preaching emphasis, he also "came out of Capernaum" early in the morning before the people could confine him to a miraculous healing ministry (meaning number two).<sup>4</sup>

As noted earlier, this figure of speech helps one to conclude that Mark 1:21-39 is a unit in the mind of the writer.<sup>5</sup> The ministerial balance depicted in vv 21-28 and lost in vv 29-34 is regained in v 39 by Jesus' timely escape from Capernaum. The amphibologia ties vv 35-39 to the preceding events as well as demonstrates Jesus' ministerial philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

That philosophy comes to the forefront through the use of this figure of speech. The figure highlights Jesus' escape from Capernaum, and the escape was designed to refocus his ministry on preaching. Preaching was primary. Healing was an important but secondary ministerial role.

Mark's construction of v 39 shows how well Peter and the disciples came to understand Jesus' philosophy of ministry. The verse begins with the simple term *ēlthen* ("he went"), which contrasts with the preceding *exēlthon*. This main verb is modified by two participles of manner, "preaching" (cf. v 38) and "casting out demons" (cf. vv 25-27) —in that order. These two aspects of Jesus' ministry are separated and ranked by word placement. In the modifying clauses the first and primary idea is "preaching" and the last and secondary idea is "casting out." This sentence construction is more than coincidence.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the amphibologia helps one understand that Jesus had to fight constantly to maintain his philosophy of ministry. Here Mark 1:40-45 clearly becomes part of the preceding thematic unit.

While traversing Galilee preaching and healing, Jesus cured a leper. After doing so Jesus "sternly warned him . . . , 'See that you say nothing to anyone'" (vv 43-44). But the leper "went out and began to proclaim it freely" (v 45), with the result that "Jesus could no longer publicly

<sup>4</sup>Compare the use of *exelthen* in v 34.

<sup>5</sup>Verses 40-45 will be drawn into this unit later.

<sup>6</sup>Gould's rejection of the divine commission aspect of v 38 causes him to downplay any ministerial philosophy of Jesus outlined here. See footnote 2.

<sup>7</sup>For discussions of emphasis through word order see C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: University Press, 1971) 166; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 417.

enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas" (v 45).

Jesus' stern warning relates to the preceding Capernaum experience. If the multitudes did not hear that the leper had been healed, Jesus could remain free to emphasize preaching. But the crowds did hear and they flocked to the miracle-worker, expecting him to cure everyone else who was sick. Jesus avoided these crowds much the same as he did at Capernaum, and for the same reason. Why Jesus escaped from Capernaum is why he rendered this stern warning to the leper and why he withdrew to the unpopulated areas. He was fighting to control his ministerial balance.

The figure of speech in Mark 1:38 involves only one word, yet the interpretive light it can shed on the context and on the philosophy and pattern of Jesus' ministry is great. Consequently, caution in pursuing this avenue of study is needed, but to pursue every avenue of Scriptural understanding is the exegete's responsibility.