

A Second Look at the Gospel of Mark—Midway in the Year of Mark

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The Currents issue that led us into Mark's Gospel for the 2005–2006 church year (December 2005) did not do full justice, in my opinion, to the Good News—the really “Good” and the really “New”—that Mark wants us to hear as he teases us to follow his opening words: “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God.”

The major item missing—or at best fuzzy—in the articles offered was the uniquely Good, the uniquely New, in the kingdom of God (reign of God) as Mark's Jesus enacts it. One item that signals this right from the start is the frequent references to Jesus' “revealing” the kingdom of God. Fact is, Mark never uses the terms “reveal” or “revelation” at all! So Mark's Jesus does not reveal the kingdom of God— as though kingdom were already present, or had been around for a long time but concealed, and needed only to have the veil removed. No, apart from Jesus, the kingdom of God is not here, à la Mark. When “Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God, ” *then* “the kingdom of God was drawing near,” *then* “the time was fulfilled.” Jesus makes the kingdom of God happen. He enacts it. No Jesus, no kingdom of God—at least not Mark's version of both Jesus and the kingdom of God.

So what is Jesus doing that had not been done before? What is

not done when Jesus isn't there doing it? The kingdom of God is the code word, but what's that?

Yes, indeed, what *is* the kingdom of God? That was a hot-potato item at the time of the Reformation, one might even say *the* hot potato. It is a hot potato now. It's hot in NT studies. See the stream of books coming from the Jesus Seminar and others as well—and the responses they elicit. One of the major Jesus Seminarists tells us that the debate about the kingdom of God is whether it is “salvation or ethics.” He claims that for Jesus the kingdom of God was ethics, and for his followers “ethics was salvation.” But not all agree. Kingdom of God is hot also in mission theology studies. See contemporary missiology journals and conferences rallying around *missio Dei* as God's own kingdom project but then debating whether that kingdom of God is a “reign of peace and justice” on earth or something other than that.

The kingdom in Reformation Lutheran theology

Both of the major alternatives to the Lutheran reformers in the sixteenth century, the Roman establishment and the left-wing “radicals,” were to this extent united— they both understood kingdom of God as a godly society on European soil. They differed sharply on the contours of that godly society. For one it was the godly society, mandated by Christ, organized and now managed by the churchly hierarchy centered in Rome. It was a “holy” Roman churchly empire replacing the less-than-holy pagan Roman empire that preceded it for a millennium on the very same soil.

For the left-wingers (enthusiasts and spiritualists, as their critics labeled them), such hierarchical centrism with top-down

authority—and clout to carry it out—was still the pagan model, the exact opposite of what kingdom of God “really” was. For them the kingdom was a “narrow gauge” community—better, a community of godly communities—rallying around Jesus as Lord and Savior, not run from the top like an empire but organized ad hoc as internally cohesive fellowships committed to being a different mini-society, a radically different one, a godly one, in the midst of the ungodly maxi-society that was everywhere else. Kingdom of God was what Rome—in its ancient pagan format or its currently “holy” format—was not. Kingdom of God was a countercommunity of justice for injustice, love for cruelty, egalitarianism for hierarchicalism, mercy for military, peace for war, persuasion for coercion—and especially Jesus’ affirming the nobodies vs. Rome—pagan or holy—with its adulation for somebodies.

The Lutheran reformers said: “A pox on both your houses. That’s not what the term *kingdom of God* is talking about in the New Testament.” For the Lutheran reformers the kingdom of God was something New and Good on the *coram deo* agenda, where folks stand in the presence of God. It was not on the *coram hominibus* agenda, where folks face each other in daily life in human society. Being interpreted: kingdom of God occurs in the interface between God and human creatures, not the interface between the humans. Thus kingdom of God is not about ethics—how folks can live in godly fashion with one another in “peace and justice,” to use the current mantra. Kingdom of God is about salvation—how folks, yes, sinful folks, can survive, and then thrive, when standing face to face before God, which is every second of their lives. Simply said, kingdom of God is God’s own “regime change” at the God-sinner interface. God initiates the change at the interface, switching from “counting trespasses” to “son/daughter, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven.”

Let’s take a look into Luther’s Large Catechism and its

explanation of the kingdom petition (#2) of the Lord's Prayer.

The kingdom in the Catechism

What is the kingdom of God?

Answer: Simply what we heard above in the Creed [the immediately preceding section of the catechism], namely, that God sent his Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil, to bring us to himself, and to rule us as a king of righteousness, life and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience. To this end he also gave his Holy Spirit to deliver this to us through his holy Gospel and to enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power.

Notice *where* the regime changes: in our God-relationship, and that bilaterally. First from God's side in God's "sending Christ ... to bring us to himself," and subsequently from our side in a "faith" that now trusts this change-of-rule(s) "given" by the Holy Trinity.

In the next paragraph Luther signals the mission trajectory of this kingdom petition.

This we ask, both in order that we who have accepted it may remain faithful and grow daily in it and also in order that it may find approval and gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world. In this way many, led by the Holy Spirit, may come into the kingdom of grace and become partakers of redemption, so that we may all remain together eternally in this kingdom.

Is there any connection here to the agenda being hyped in much kingdom-of-God theology today, the agendas of peace, justice, and the integrity of creation? Not, in this kingdom petition, for Luther. That is not the kingdom of God agenda. "From this

you see that we are not asking here for ... a temporal, perishable blessing, but for an eternal, priceless treasure and for everything that God himself possesses.”

Are then this-worldly blessings of peace, justice, and creation’s preservation of no concern for Luther? By no means. But these concerns come in the fourth petition together with everything that comes under the umbrella of “daily bread.” God gives daily bread “even to the godless and rogues”—thus apart from any Christ component in the transaction. To use another of Luther’s metaphors, it is God’s left-hand regime in action. All of this happens apart from the efforts of the One now sitting at God’s right hand. In short, all of those daily bread goodies do not bring the super-goodies in the kingdom of God package—“bring us to God and generate faith.”

Yet daily bread is big stuff. That loaf is as wide as *coram hominibus*—the whole human race—reaches:

Everything that belongs to our entire life in this world ... not only food and clothing and other necessities for our body, but also peace and concord in our daily activities, associations, and situations of every sort with the people among whom we live and with whom we interact—in short, in everything that pertains to the regulation of both our domestic and our civil or political affairs.

Sounds like the current mantra of “peace, justice, and the integrity of creation.” However, note this: Never once does Christ’s name appear as Luther expounds the daily-bread petition. Why not?

God has other agents assigned to these agendas. Hundreds of them! “Governments ...rulers ... the emperor, kings, and all estates, especially the princes of our land, all councilors, magistrates, and officials. ” And, even closer to home, “spouse,

children, and servants ... faithful neighbors, and good friends," etc. In Luther's vocabulary these agents are all God's left-handers, caring for and preserving God's old creation and us within it.

But they—Christians included in their left-hand callings—are incapable of fabricating the kingdom of God, a.k.a. the New Creation. Left-handers do not have the wherewithal to bring on the regime change that reconciles sinners to God. Godly agents they indeed are, but not "God-ly " enough to carry out the task of the incarnate son of God—in his body on the tree. It's that simple. God was in Christ, yes, attending to that agenda. That is the hype of saying "*solus Christus* " in Reformation rhetoric. Scripture never predicates this achievement to any other of God's manifold agents throughout the world.

But after Easter Christ does pass on this unique authority to his disciples—"to forgive sins." So with this authorization they actually do become agents for the regime change that was once Christ's and Christ's alone. Now recreated to have a right hand in addition to their left, they become "little Christs " in the right-hand regime called kingdom of God. Of course, they get this clout, and the chutzpah to exercise it, only by virtue of God's original Right-Hander hanging on to them—and they to him.

Summa. The agenda of peace, justice, and the integrity of creation is the stuff of the daily bread of human life; it is not the stuff of the kingdom of God, God's reconciling regime change with sinners. The fourth petition is distinct from the second.

In both we are still petitioners. It is still the same deity, with two different agendas. One cares for creation, the other redeems it. One is God's "old " regime in the "old creation, " the other is God's "regime change" that brings on a "new

creation.” One is ethics *coram hominibus*, the other salvation *coram deo*. The scripture’s own anthropomorphic image of an ambidextrous deity helped Luther get his hands on it.

Back to Mark’s Gospel

Are Mark and Martin on the same page? One way is to look at all the kingdom of God references in Mark’s Gospel. There are twelve of them in the NRSV, although “other ancient authorities” have a different count.

The first one (1:15) I cited above and interpreted as: when “Jesus comes preaching the Good News of God, ” then “the kingdom of God is at hand.” And therefore two imperatives are in order: “Repent and believe the Good News.” In nickel words, “Turn away from whatever you’ve had your heart hanging on and hang your heart on Jesus’s Good News.” The folks noticed its novelty. “A new teaching! With authority! ” (1:27) It’s not only Good News *of* God, it’s Good News *from* God. That is made “perfectly clear” in the pericope that anchors the first series of healings. “My son, your sins are forgiven”—and he is healed of his paralysis. That designates what the “authority” issue is and who has it. Here Jesus’ authority is designated not as super-physician “but that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” It’s a salvation agenda, not ethics.

The next three references to the kingdom (4:11, 26, 30) are linked to parables. Though the “mystery” of the kingdom of God “has been given” to the disciples, and parabolically hidden from the outsiders, the disciples “do not understand the parables ” either. What is so hidden about the kingdom? Though Mark’s Jesus says it plainly—three explicit passion predictions—what nobody catches on to is that it takes a crucified Messiah to unlock the parables. That is the mystery the farmer doesn’t know even

though he eventually benefits from the harvest. That is the infinitesimal mustard seed that morphs into huge-God-sized-dimensions.

The fifth reference to the kingdom (9:47) comes at the linchpin between chapters 8 and 9. First comes Peter's Christ confession at Caesarea Philippi (coupled with his "dumb" rebuking of Jesus for making the first passion prediction). Then follows the "take up your cross and follow me" and the two alternatives for losing/ saving your life. After this Jesus says that some of those "standing here will not see death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." That power-play happened on Good Friday. It may not have looked like power at all if you viewed it with *theologia gloriae* lenses. But if you viewed it with the lenses of *theologia crucis*, it was the grand finale of his "authority to forgive sins." Some did see it, even if it took a longer time to see it clearly (8:22ff.) Some never did. But that was not because it wasn't there right before their eyes. They had eye trouble. "They did indeed see, but did not understand" (4:12). This kingdom is available for all, but all don't get into it. Why not?

Kingdom reference six (9:47) gives a clue. There are things that make folks stumble: dear objects of value, even as dear as "a hand, a foot, an eye." When hearts are hanging on such objects, even great and good ones like these three, so that they stumble, get barricaded from Jesus' agenda, they don't get into the kingdom. This is but a variation on Jesus' opening line in 1:15 about repenting and hanging your heart on God's Good News. So it is "better for you to enter the kingdom of God with only one of the original two than to go into the grim future of unforgiven sinners."

On to kingdom references seven and eight (10:14, 15). The kingdom is for kids. Grownups need to be childlike in order to

be there. It's all about "letting," about the posture of receptivity. The kids in the pericope "let" Jesus "take them in his arms, and bless them, laying his hands upon them." Blessing is a *coram deo* transaction—an absolute freebee, a straight analogue to a regime of God's mercy management of sinners. God is the active subject, sinners the passive receivers. The kingdom of God transpires only if the receivers "let" it happen.

Kingdom reference nine (10:23, 24, 25) tells how hard it is for rich folks to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples are "exceedingly astonished," yet they sense it's about their own *coram deo* agenda. (One "ancient authority" has Mark making it perfectly clear here. It is "those who *trust* in riches." Trust is *coram deo* stuff.) The disciples reply: "Who then can be saved?" Doesn't wealth mark one as favored by God? Conversely, don't we get credit for all we've given up to follow you, Jesus? All depends, says Jesus, whether or not the divestment was "for my sake and for the gospel." The kingdom of God is not about brownie points, says Jesus. Browniepoints— trusters wind up last; folks with no points at all wind up first. It is God's own "impossible" way of answering "Who can be saved?"

The tenth kingdom word (12:34) is spoken to the scribe who got Jesus to answer the "great commandment" question, after which Jesus also adds the "second commandment" corollary. The scribe then commends Jesus for his right answer and adds that obeying the double-love commandment is "more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Whereupon Jesus says: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." How so "not far" if God's kingdom is what we've been portraying it to be?

Well, he is clearly focused on the *coram deo* agenda. That puts him "nearer" than those of his day who thought otherwise. Could Mark be teasing us with a pun, that, face to face with Jesus

(*coram Jesu*), this questioner is indeed as “near” to the kingdom as he’s ever been? Still stuck on getting the commandments right—even “with all his heart”—he is not yet in and under the mercy regime, the radical regime change, that God is offering in the One standing before him.

Kingdom reference eleven (14:25) takes place when Jesus is on the eve of his capture: “This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. ” This has to be pointing straight to Good Friday just hours away. In responding to the pleas of Zebedee’s sons for privileged places “in your glory” (10:35–44), Jesus had spoken of “drinking the cup ” that entailed “giving his life as a ransom for many.” Here in 14:25 Jesus says it’s a “new ” drinking. He had never done it before, nor had any other predecessor servant of God. This sort of kingdom-cup drinking ransoms sinners. Ransoming sinners is a *coram deo* agenda. It’s salvation, not ethics.

The last reference to the kingdom in Mark (15:43) comes when Joseph of Arimathea, “who was also looking for the kingdom of God, ” closes the Good Friday story and “laid him in a tomb.” Even though we’ll never know what Joseph may have said, we do see what Mark wants us to see. Joseph is a disciple, an insider to what Jesus was up to. Yes, he was a “respected member of the Sanhedrin,” and he was very “near” to the kingdom of God. So near that he actually carried the body of the Regime Changer to its resting place.

Conclusive for this survey of kingdom of God in Mark is that Mark and Martin are indeed on the same page. No hint in Mark that the kingdom Jesus is enacting is the *coram hominibus* agenda of “peace, justice, and the integrity of creation.” Peace instead of enmity between God and hu- mankind, mercy-justice

that trumps equity-justice for sinners, and the integrity of being reintegrated into God's family. All of that transpires by virtue of what Mark announces in his very first words: "the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

A kingdom-of-God look at the remaining Markan pericopes

There are twenty-five Sundays after Pentecost in the 2006 Church Year, and I shall survey the final twelve Sunday Gospels this year from Mark. These twelve follow immediately the Johannine "comma" inserted into the lectionary from Pentecost 9 to 12. I do not repeat comments on these pericopes made in the paragraphs above.

If kingdom of God in Mark does indeed unfold on the *coram deo* (CD) interface, the Sunday Gospel readings signal a gospel like this:

Pentecost 13, Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23. It's things inside that defile. Defilement and cleansing are an "inside" matter, of "the heart," that is, "hearts that are far from God." Clearly a CD agenda. The traditions of the elders—then and now or elsewhere—won't fix it. They can't fix it. "Worshipping him" is now "the commandment of God." Who else can clean up the mess at the CD interface? Moses is brought into the discussion, but "the way you handle Moses, given your far-away hearts, voids the word of God that he spoke."

Pentecost 14, Mark 7:24–37. Syrophoenician woman's daughter and the "ephphatha" miracle. Spirit possession is always a CD agenda. God is the rightful "owner" of all images of God. Alternate possessors are usurpers, infringing on the CD interface. Whereas our mindset today is to wrestle with the

“demon” element in exorcism pericopes, the NT accent is on the possessing, an alien “lord/owner.” That alien is now managing God’s turf—to the destruction of the managed property. Destruction is what *diabolos* means. The outsider mother, who somehow had gotten the clue about Jesus’ authority on her daughter’s CD turf, trusts him to use it for her, though she has zero credentials for her petition. She begs (absolute posture of receptivity), and he does it. The “*ephphatha*” pericope is parallel, with the accent of open ears and loosened tongue, *the* channels (so Luther) for heart transactions.

Pentecost 15, Mark 8:27–38. Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi. Peter is re- buked. Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, and that triggers the first passion prediction. Peter is blinded by the suffering-servant center of what he has just confessed. Not only for Jesus, but for “any who come after me.” Saving and losing life is a CD agenda. Everybody does finally “lose.” But there are two ways to do your losing. One is to hang on to your life and strive to preserve every segment of it. But that’s forfeiture for sure, a guaranteed loser. The other way is to lose it (give it away) “for my sake and the gospel’s” and—voila!—you get it all back again! You are either ashamed of this “loser” Jesus or you trust him. That determines the interface with the Father—from here to eternity. Maxim: “Winning by losing,” but losing in a particular (messianic) way.

Pentecost 16, Mark 9:30–37. Comes now the second passion prediction, “but they did not understand and were afraid to ask.” Not a smart tactic. Just how dumb it is we see in the next paragraph, where they argue about who is the brightest and best. Jesus’ one-liner response is “Do you want to be first? Then be last and everybody’s slave,” after which he adds seemingly nonsequitur words about “receiving children, receiving me, and receiving the one who sent me.” Even if a bit opaque here, Mark does (a) hype children again, (b) signal the CD “defect” in the

disciples in wanting to be climbers, and(c)signal the kingdom of God: a posture of receptivity and receiving (= faith-trusting) the one whom God has sent.

Pentecost 17, Mark 9:38–50. Added here is the incident of the “outsider” exorcising “in Jesus’ name.” Jesus responds that whoever operates “in Jesus’ name” is OK. What it means to work “in Jesus’ name” is not to recite the words as a mantra but to be in his name, that is, “owned” by him and thus re-owned (=the literal meaning of redemption) by his Father. This reading concludes with the word about good and bad salt and the imperative “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” Peace *coram hominibus* is a product of peace *coram deo*. So the saline solution must be the very one who’s speaking these salty lines.

Pentecost 18, Mark 10:2–16. Added to the kingdom-of-God text here is the divorce pericope. The two together offer the overall contrast between what’s “lawful” (kosher) and what Jesus is doing with the kids. The depth problem in fractured marriages, says Jesus, is “hardness of heart.” That is a God problem, a CD dilemma. Moses’ legislation is God-given. Like much of God’s law, it is an interim stopgap emergency measure (so Luther) to prevent even worse destruction. But Moses’ measure does not heal the CD dilemma. What does heal that dilemma is signaled by the kingdom-of-God dealings Jesus does with the kids: embracing, blessing, keeping his hands on them. Healing comes by receiving. All of the benefits of the kingdom of God come only in the posture of receptivity.

Pentecost 19, Mark 10:17–31. The rich man’s “good teacher” inquiry leads into the kingdom of God conversation. He asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Whether Mark intends us to see the oxymoron of “doing” something in order to “inherit” something is hard to tell. Nevertheless the agenda is CD–eternal

life and treasure in heaven. "Divest, radically divest," says Jesus, not only your "great possessions" but also your addiction to "observing all these commandments" in order to get your "inheritance." Here's the kingdom-of-God alternative: "Come, follow me."

Pentecost 20, Mark 10:35–45. Here Jesus expounds the authority issue. There are two kinds, he says. There's Gentile authority and his alternative—yes, the kingdom of God's alternative—sort of authority. One is authority over, the other is authority under. James and John—yes, "the ten" too—are hooked on Gentile authority. They want to be on top. But that's an absolute no-no in Jesus' kingdom of God regimen: "It shall not be so among you." Kingdom of God authority is the upside-down pyramid, serving and not being served. Jesus makes it happen, "giving his life a ransom for many." Thus he "drinks the cup," "gets baptized." James and John say they are "able" to do that, too, but of course they aren't. Their own CD status needs help. When that interface is "served" by Jesus' own life giving, James and John will indeed replicate his "drinking the cup" and "getting baptized"—not only with his authority under them but also into exercising his bizarre upside-down authority themselves with others.

Pentecost 21, Mark 10:46–52. It is all about mercy. Two times blind Bartimaeus pleads for mercy. Even the reference to Jesus as Son of David is a coded mercy reference. Bartimaeus has already "seen" something in Jesus; Mark doesn't tell us how. John 9 takes a whole chapter to render his second opinion on this diagnosis. But Mark tells it succinctly: It is "faith" that "makes Bartimaeus well." What "faith" means here is at least twofold: (1) confidence that Jesus is able to do what is asked for, and (2) trust that Jesus will actually do it for a nobody, a blind beggar. Sure enough, Bartimaeus "received his sight and followed him on the way."

Pentecost 22, Mark 12:28–34. The “no more questions” to Jesus comes with the either-or of holding to the commandments or to the Christ on the CD interface. The lectionary text editors could have made it easier for preaching the kingdom on this one if they had added Jesus’ counter question in the very next verses that Mark gives us (“David calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?”). Follow Melanchthon’s axiom in Apology 4. If the promise is not present in a pericope to be preached, “add it, ” he says. Mark has it right there in the following verses. Note that the Christ “is the son of David.” Not Moses. Thus he is genetically inclined toward God’s chesed operation, mercy for the commandment breakers. The folks who need that, who know they need that, “hear him gladly.”

Pentecost 23, Mark 12:38–44. The contrast Jesus makes between the scribes and the widow is itself a classic kingdom of God parable. The switcheroo happens as the really religious folks “receive greater condemnation” and the commendation goes to the nobody who after her offering has nothing. How like God’s own operation in Jesus. God, the widow, giving his all, so that sinners can get genetic healing at the CD interface.

Pentecost 24, Mark 13:1-8. The Sunday reading is only the first eight verses of Mark’s 36-verse apocalypse chapter. The entire chapter is one unit, with nine adverbative “but ” interventions as Jesus zigzags through the collapse of temple and cosmos. When worlds collapse—our personal private ones as well as cosmic cataclysms— the “but ” of the kingdom of God “gospel being preached to all nations” is manifold. That gospel survives, and so do those trusting it. Survival is always an event at the CD interface. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” “But whoever endures to the end will be saved.” When an “apocalypse now ” calls you to the witness stand and you are tongue-tied with angst, “say whatever

is given you in that hour ... the Holy Spirit will supply the vocables. " Mark gives a hint of an "apocalypse now " on Good Friday after- noon with a solar eclipse and a shredded temple curtain. Matthew tweaks the apocalyptic theme even more as Jesus dies. Throughout, the watchword is "watch, watch, watch." *But* do so cross-eyed: left eye on our crumbling worlds, right eye on the One whom God raised after his own crumbling.

After all this, what's "Good," what's "New"?

Answer: Everything. From that "beginning of the gospel" and its Good Friday and Easter Sunday climax comes the freebee offer of a life that lasts, survival on the CD interface. If that's not good, not new, what is? From that new interface new intrahuman interfaces sprout, and for Mark it is the nobodies who are the beneficiaries. Thirty- three times Mark refers to them with the Greek word *ochlos*, usually rendered in English translations as "crowd, throng, multitude." Korean NT scholar Ahn Byung Moo has shown that this key term in Mark is not really a numerical designation but a social-theological term. The *ochlos* are the outsiders, the nobodies, the rabble, the folks who don't count. It's not that nobodiness makes anybody virtuous. No, the *ochlos* in Mark are sinners, too. They also cry "Cru- cify!" at the end. They are not very differ- ent from Judas or Peter and all the deserting disciples. But Jesus still comes to them and for them, and when it clicks at the CD interface, Mark tells us "the *ochlos* heard him gladly."

We do not get much "ethical" admonition in Mark's Gospel. People, often his adversaries, come to Jesus with apparently moral questions asking "Is it lawful?" But Jesus regularly bends them into CD ques- tions—salvation issues, not ethics. Not that the seekers are left with "only" salvation and no "ethics"—the

classic charge (canard?) contra Lutherans—but apart from the CD salvation that Jesus offers there is no Christian ethics. Ethics, yes, but none that flows from the kingdom's mercy interface with God. Only from such new roots can the tree bear new fruits. Only Matthew and Luke quote Jesus saying that. Mark could have but did not. Possibly no one ever passed it on to him. What he does pass on to us is still mighty “good” and mighty “new”—just as he promised in his opening sentence.

[ASecondLookAtMark \(PDF\)](#)