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1

A THEOLOGY OF MATTHEW

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Before considering particular aspects of the theological message of the gospel of Matthew, it will be helpful to think about the nature of the four gospels. Providing a brief definition of a gospel, however, is not so simple as it might seem since the Gospels function in a number of different ways. In one sense, the Gospels serve as biographies of Jesus. Matthew, for example, includes an account of events connected with the birth of Jesus, aspects of His life in public ministry, and His death. Like most biographies, it provides insight into its subject not simply by chronicling the words and deeds that were a part of that life but also by interpreting their significance for the reader.

Unlike most modern biographies, however, the Gospels are relatively brief. Matthew, for example, devoted several extended sections of his gospel to Jesus' teaching, but each can be read in a few minutes' time. That the gospel writer was presenting a summary of Jesus' teaching seems clear. Comparison of similar passages in the Gospels suggests too that each writer exercised freedom (in comparison to the constraints usually associated with modern historiography) in presenting and arranging this material. This freedom allowed each author, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to highlight different aspects of Jesus' words and deeds. The result is that their accounts provide cumulatively a richer understanding of the significance of His life and ministry.

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Although Jesus is the focal point of the Gospels, an account of His life and teachings is not their sole concern. The Gospels also help readers understand some of the factors that led to the formation of the church, since the disciples whom Jesus drew around Him and whom He instructed became its founding members. Considering what Jesus said and did with His first disciples serves to answer in part a crucial question: "How did we get to where we are today?" The Gospels therefore are also pastoral homilies, sermons in writing that seek to gain from every reader an affirmative and practical response.

GOD

While Jesus' life and ministry are the focus of Matthew's gospel, he makes it clear that what Jesus said and did, as well as the events that conspired to bring Him to the cross, are a part of the plan and purpose of God. A primary means of making this point is in the frequent linkage of events in the life of Jesus to passages from the Old Testament. To one degree or another all the gospel writers portray Jesus' life and ministry as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and expectation. But Matthew is particularly distinctive in this regard. His gospel is characterized by a series of Old Testament quotations introduced by a phrase using the verb "fulfill" in the passive voice (*plērothēnai*). The first occurrence illustrates the nature of these introductions: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet" (Matt. 1:22). This is followed by a quotation of Isaiah 7:14. The event or circumstance is said to have happened in accord with God's plan and purpose.¹

Several of these citations are linked with the circumstances of Jesus' birth and the family's subsequent flight to Egypt and return to settle in Nazareth. From a human point of view these events seem oddly at variance with the auspicious beginning normally associated with a king, especially one who is divine. Even in His early days the "beloved Son" and His family had to flee persecution in Israel. They returned only to take up residence in the "backwoods" of Galilee, far removed from the center of political and religious influence in Jerusalem where a Davidic king would be expected to reside. But by means of these Old Testament citations Matthew showed that in these apparently spontaneous exigencies the purposeful hand of God may be seen fulfilling His plan in the life of Jesus.

That the purpose of God is achieved despite adverse circumstances and deplorable individual behavior is illustrated also by Matthew in the presentation of Jesus' genealogy. In the first verse of his Gospel, Matthew said Jesus is a descendant of both David and Abraham. The significance of those designations for Matthew's portrait of Jesus will be explored subsequently. For now suffice it to say that His Abrahamic and Davidic lineage involved not a few distressing twists and turns which nevertheless did not deter the outworking of the divine plan.

1. There are eleven citations like this (1:22–23; 2:5–6; 2:15; 2:17–18; 2:23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:35; 21:4–5; 27:9–10). To this may be added 26:56, where no specific Old Testament passage is cited: "This has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled."

The mention of the four women in Jesus' genealogy (Matt. 1:1–17) is an illustration of this. Why Matthew chose to mention these women, contrary to the usual practice of citing men only, cannot be determined with certainty. But it is noteworthy that Tamar (v. 3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), and Bathsheba (v. 6, named only as "Uriah's wife") were Gentiles, and, in the case of Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba, each was linked with acts of immorality. They serve to remind readers both that God has shown mercy to "unworthy" Gentiles in the past and also that the plan of God is not frustrated by human failure. The lineage of the Messiah is checkered with some dubious characters, the sort a selective genealogist might be inclined to leave unmentioned. Though they are not meant to be models of behavior (as will be seen, Matthew set forth the highest ethical standards), they are a reminder that the grace of God is often extended to the unlikeliest people who in turn serve to advance His purposes in the world.

This theme, that the plan of God advances by means of the unlikeliest people and in the face of inscrutable circumstances, appears repeatedly in Matthew's gospel. A classic text in this regard is Jesus' prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure" (11:25–26; cf. Luke 10:21). This statement is connected with the theme of the preceding section, the mission of the disciples (beginning at Matt. 9:35). It is both a reminder that the response accorded their preaching is inseparably related to the work of God in opening hearts and minds to the message they proclaimed and also a reminder that this grace is most often extended to those who are little esteemed by society at large.

The disciples themselves are a case in point. A motley band of diverse characters, they seem unlikely candidates for the role of representing Jesus and advancing His ministry. Yet these are the ones to whom God has given revelation concerning who Jesus is. This is brought out clearly in Matthew's account of Peter's confession. In reply to the question, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Peter answered: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:13, 16). But Jesus' response makes it clear that Peter had not arrived at this fact by his own cleverness or intellectual ability, however considerable they may have been (v. 17). Peter was one of the "little children" mentioned by Jesus in 11:25, to whom God had revealed this truth. Notice Matthew's distinctive record of Jesus' words to Peter on this occasion: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (16:17). It is God who reveals (the same verb, *apokaluptō*, is used in both 11:25 and 16:17) this truth to people in accord with His "good pleasure" (11:26).

The same view of the sovereign work of God revealing truth to some but not to others is also expressed by Jesus in answer to the disciples' question about His use of parables (13:10: "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"). He answered, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them" (v. 11). The use of the passive verb ("has been given") in

this statement is sometimes called a “divine passive.”² In this way Jewish writers or speakers could refer to an action of God without explicitly mentioning His name, a manner of speech considered reverential.³ But it was understood who carried out the action of the verb. The point once again is that the act of revelation whereby people understand and believe the message proclaimed by Jesus is something God does.

Whereas these statements may be discomfiting to those who think of themselves as masters of their own destiny, it is unlikely that Matthew recorded them solely for that purpose. Rather, these affirmations about God’s sovereignty, particularly connected to a positive response to the message from and about Jesus, serve to quiet concerns the disciples may have had about their own suitability and effectiveness for the task entrusted to them. The reception accorded the message they proclaim is ultimately God’s doing, not theirs. They had a ministry to discharge and were to do so in a manner pleasing to God, but the results were not their responsibility. This is a liberating concept, not only to those beset with self-doubt (moments of which the average individual called on to carry on Jesus’ work would understandably have) but also to those besotted with self-confidence (Peter had his moments, as do others), who seek through winsomeness or manipulative skill to magnify the effect of the gospel among their hearers. To a beleaguered minority, which the church in the first century generally was, assurance about God’s sovereignty was an encouraging word. Thinking of this sort could, of course, lead to passivity or produce an escapist mentality, but Matthew’s presentation goes a long way toward precluding that eventuality.

For one thing, Matthew did not hesitate to record the fact that both John the Baptist and Jesus fulfilled the will of God and in doing so followed a path that led to martyrdom. The hand of God in this is seen at the very outset of Jesus’ entrance into a life of public ministry. Immediately after Jesus’ baptism, with the words of God, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (3:17) still ringing in the reader’s ears, Matthew recorded the temptation of Jesus, introducing it with these words: “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil” (4:1). Each of the synoptic writers recorded this in his own way, but Matthew’s readers cannot miss the fact that the hand of God was in this experience of temptation for Jesus. He is led (a passive verb) by the Spirit (the agent of God)⁴

2. Cf. Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk from the 9th–10th German ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1961), 313; and Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 8th ed. (London: SCM, 1972), 203 n. 57.

3. This method of expression was also related to a concern not to take the name of God in vain (Ex. 20:7). An obvious preventive was to use the name of God as infrequently as possible. In this way there arose metaphorical circumlocutions (the abode of God, “heaven” in place of “God”) and the use of the passive verb (avoiding the mention of God as the subject of the verb).

4. In Matthew 3:16 the Gospel writer modified mention of the Spirit with the genitive “of God,” signifying either that the Spirit “belongs” to God (possession) or comes from Him (source). In either case, the Holy Spirit is the agent who carries out the will of God.

in order to be tempted (another passive verb, this time an infinitive of purpose) by the devil (the agent of the temptation). In view of the citations from Deuteronomy subsequently referred to by Jesus in the passage (4:4, 7, 10), the reader should think of the experience of Israel in the wilderness as the Old Testament counterpart to this trial of Jesus (cf. Deut. 8:2). But the reader may be excused if the story of Job also comes to mind. Although what happened to Job is shown clearly to be known by God, at least in that account Satan came to God, as it were, to seek permission for what ensued. In the case of Jesus, He was led into this temptation by the Spirit! The final petition of the Lord's (model) Prayer takes on special significance when seen in light of Jesus' experience in the wilderness: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matt. 6:13). James correctly affirmed that God Himself does not tempt anyone (James 1:13), but Matthew leaves no doubt that He sometimes permits temptation to befall His children.

Matthew likewise made clear that trials may lead to martyrdom, as it did for John and Jesus. In Jesus' missionary charge to the disciples, Matthew included this word of warning from Jesus: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (10:28–29). If someone were to devise a "frightful sayings" category for biblical statements, this would be a candidate. Yet it too provides a word of assurance regarding the outworking of God's plan for His people in the world. The experience of opposition, persecution, even martyrdom, is not an indication that God has cut His people loose, or turned His back on them. They are experiences that happen, as they did to John and Jesus, to the choicest of God's servants. The sparrow does not fall apart from the will of God. But the sparrow does fall. Such is Matthew's vision of the will of God.

This is certainly not all Matthew wrote about the way God is carrying out His plan for this world through His servants in the church. But it is a reminder that the God whom Matthew portrayed often accomplishes His purposes in unexpected and, from a human point of view, sometimes perilous ways. In so doing, however, He is not a God removed from His people and indifferent to their plight. He is intimately concerned with their well-being, aware of their need, and solicitous for their care.

Several passages in the Sermon on the Mount make this point. As an introductory statement to the Lord's Prayer, the disciples were assured of God's knowledgeable concern for them: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (6:8). This assurance is repeated a few verses later when the disciples were told that they need not worry about adequate food and clothing since, "Your heavenly Father knows that you need them" (v. 32) and "all these things will be given to you" (v. 33). In the same manner God is described as a giver of "good gifts" to those who ask Him (7:11). These "good gifts" include not only the necessities of physical life but also the spiritual blessings associated with the gospel (cf. the use of the same word, *agatha*, "good" in Rom. 10:15 [Isa. 52:7] and Heb. 10:1).⁵

5. The parallel statement in Luke's gospel (11:13) refers to God giving the Holy Spirit, the agent of the many "good gifts" connected with the blessings of salvation.

God's care for all members of the community of disciples is brought out also in the parable of the lost sheep (Matt. 18:12–14), recorded in a chapter containing various instructions about the maintenance of right relationships with those who are followers of Christ. This parable is introduced by a verse that emphasizes the importance to God of those who for various reasons might be little esteemed by others in the community. It is actually a warning: "See that you do not look down on these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven" (18:10). While this verse has sometimes been understood to say that all Christians have a guardian angel assigned to their care, that is probably an overinterpretation of the statement. What is affirmed is that angels from the highest order (those nearest to God) carry out ministry to those poorly esteemed (*kata-phroneō* means "to look down" or "treat with contempt"⁶) by human society. This is a reminder both that God's values differ from humanity's and also that one's estimate of the importance of others may differ from God's estimate and may therefore be in need of revision.

The parable of the lost sheep (18:12–14) is an illustration of this. Jesus focused on a member of the community who had gone astray (the descriptive word, *planaō*, means "lead astray" or "cause to wander," hence "deceive" or "mislead"). The response of some may be to say, "Good riddance" or "We're glad he's gone." But however prone some may be to treat this wandering one with contempt, Jesus' words here are a sharp reminder that to God, the weak and wavering person is important. This one should be solicitously sought and, if possible, saved from the error of his way. God is "not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (18:14). This affirmation of God's concern for the lost is not limited to those who count themselves disciples. Matthew also recorded Jesus' words about God's care for the world generally as a basis for exhorting disciples to demonstrate love to all people, even adversaries: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (5:44–45).

The point is clear enough. God bestows natural blessings comprehensively and unconditionally. In the same way, disciples are to love others, do what is best for them, and pray that the enemy may become an ally. There seems to be a certain dissonance in the comparison, however, because of the variance between the natural and the spiritual. Sun and rain can be seen and felt. Prayer is certainly less tangible. Giving bread to an enemy seems a more apt comparison, but the somewhat enigmatic illustration is common to Jesus' teaching style. It provoked thought and gave no place for complacency. And as is often the case, the Old Testament provided a point of connection that serves to illuminate and reveal the comparison's symmetry.

6. Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1979), 420.

In the Old Testament God's ordering of sun and rain is not portrayed simply in terms of a natural blessing. Rather, the elements of nature also bear witness to God: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. . . . Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world" (Ps. 19:1, 4). The account of Paul's protest against the adulation directed at Barnabas and him likewise testifies to the witness of nature: "He has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons" (Acts 14:17).⁷ The natural elements are a declaration of God to all humanity about Himself.⁸ In their response of love to all people disciples similarly are to bear witness to God and manifest His kindness through their deeds. The comparison comes together then in the goal of the missionary enterprise, bringing people to a place where they too can glorify God and pray with meaning the opening petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (6:9). But that is to anticipate another aspect of Matthew's theology. Before that is considered, however, attention must be given to the leading figure of Matthew's gospel.

CHRIST

The focus of the gospel of Matthew is the person of Jesus Christ. Some appreciation for who He is and what He does may be gained by considering the various titles given to Him. But titles alone do not exhaust Matthew's message about Jesus. The accounts of what Jesus said, did, and continues to do also give insight into who He is and show why He is the proper object of faith.

The first verse of the gospel contains four descriptive names or titles of Jesus: "Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham." The name given to Him at his birth, "Jesus," is the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua," which means "the Lord saves." It was the name an angel of the Lord told Joseph to give to the son to be born to Mary, his betrothed (1:21). It was therefore chosen by God Himself, in whose behalf the angel spoke. The name described what Jesus was destined to do: "He will save his people from their sins" (1:21).

Accustomed to thinking of people having several given names, the last of which designates their family name, some may be similarly inclined to think of "Christ" as some sort of last or family name of Jesus. But it is actually a title or designation given to Him. Like the name "Jesus," it is also the Greek form of a Hebrew word—"Messiah"—and means "Anointed One," a person specially designated by God to carry out His will.

What God's will is for the Messiah is revealed in the testimony of the gospel to Jesus' life and ministry. The way in which the Messiah "will save his people from their sins" is quite different from what was most likely expected. Although it is difficult to determine with certainty what the general expectation for a messiah

7. Paul said much the same in his letter to the Romans (1:20).

8. In Isaiah 55:10–11, the word from God's mouth is likened to the rain from heaven which waters the earth.

was like among first-century Jews, it is probably fair to say that the idea of a suffering and humiliated one did not figure very largely in the public imagination.⁹

Matthew showed that those most closely associated with Jesus—His disciples—found His comments about His impending suffering and death objectionable (16:21–23) and grievous (17:22–23). Little wonder then that He generally sought to maintain a relatively low profile in the course of His ministry and attempted to limit the spread of reports about His miraculous deeds which might understandably feed nationalistic hopes for a political liberator.¹⁰ But political liberation was not His immediate goal, notwithstanding His acknowledged kingly lineage.

“SON OF DAVID”

The third designation applied to Jesus in the first verse of the gospel focuses on His kingly lineage as a descendant of David with a rightful claim to Israel’s throne. The ensuing genealogy makes this point emphatically by dividing Jesus’ family tree into three generational blocks of fourteen names each,¹¹ a number which corresponds to the cumulative sum of the Hebrew letters in the name “David”: da-leth = 4; waw = 6; da-leth = 4.¹²

This underscoring of Jesus’ Davidic connections relates to the gospel’s assertion that Jesus is indeed the King of Israel, though the display of His kingship differs markedly from the norm. He is a king characterized by humility, as Matthew quoting from Zechariah 9:9 declares: “Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey’” (Matt. 21:5). But He is nonetheless a king, a fact He acknowledged under interrogation by Pilate: “‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied” (27:11). It is a truth with which He was mocked by the Roman soldiers: “Hail, King of the Jews!” (v. 29). And it is included in the announcement placarded above Him on the cross: “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews” (v. 37).

But if the kingship of His first coming is marked by humiliation, it will not be so at His return. Here Matthew portrays Jesus as the exalted King, seated on His throne in heavenly glory (25:31). He epitomizes the reversal that will characterize the people of God generally (19:28). No longer the One who is judged, He will dispense judgment and will vindicate the righteous (25:34, 40).

9. See Jacob Neusner, William Green, Ernest Frerichs, eds., *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (New York: Cambridge Univ., 1987).

10. This is one factor in the question of why Jesus tried to keep His messiahship a secret, a phenomenon particularly associated with Mark’s account of His ministry.

11. This arrangement counts Jeconiah twice in the process, at the end of the second block (1:11) and at the beginning of the third (v. 12), which ends with Jesus as the fourteenth (v. 16).

12. This literary convention, which the Jews called *gematria* (a borrowing from the Greek word for “geometry”), is curious to modern readers but relatively ordinary and generally comprehensible to both Jewish and Gentile readers in Matthew’s day. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 7:369–74.

“SON OF ABRAHAM”

The fourth designation, “son of Abraham,” is a further reminder that Jesus was a Jew, a descendant of Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation.¹³ It may be too that readers are to think of the promise God made to Abraham, that “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3 NASB), and to see in the life and ministry of Jesus, Abraham’s son, the fulfillment of that promise.

“SON OF GOD”

This is one of the more common titles for Jesus in Matthew’s gospel and, some would say, the most important.¹⁴ In the Old Testament, Israel as a whole (Hos. 11:1) and different groups or individuals within Israel, such as individual kings (2 Sam. 7:14) or priests (Mal. 1:6), were sometimes called sons of God. In the New Testament, Christians are also called sons of God (e.g., Rom. 8:14).

The significance of the idea of sonship applied to these various groups is that those who are called sons are expected to represent God their Father faithfully and to carry out His will. The same idea is central to the use of the title with regard to Jesus. Unlike anyone else, He faithfully carried out the will of God the Father, a fact poignantly affirmed in His prayer in Gethsemane: “My Father . . . may your will be done” (Matt. 26:42).

“Son of God” is thus first a functional description. It does, of course, have relevance for understanding Jesus’ status and relationship to God, but the fact that others have been and will be called “sons of God” is a reminder that it is less an ontological statement or confirmation of His deity, and more an ethical or functional affirmation that Jesus did in fact carry out the will of His Father.

There is, of course, no question about His deity. His conception was “from the Holy Spirit” (1:20). He is called “Immanuel,” which means “God with us” (1:23). He has been given “all authority in heaven and on earth” (28:18). But the designation “Son of God” gives particular attention to His manner of life. In this area too He showed Himself unique.

“SON OF MAN”

If any title rivals “Son of God” for place of greatest importance as a descriptive designation for Jesus, it is the title “Son of Man.” Jesus used this designation of Himself more often than the other titles. Some would say it has no more significance than that of an ambiguous circumlocution, a roundabout way by which Jesus could say things about Himself without using the personal pronoun “I.” The validity of this contention is illustrated by the fact that the gospel writers sometimes interchange “I” and “Son of Man” in their reporting of His statements.

13. The Jewish historian Josephus refers to him as “our father Abraham” (*Jewish Antiquities* 1.158; cf. John 8:39). In the New Testament another designation for Jesus is “seed of Abraham” (John 8:33, 37; Rom. 9:7; 11:1).

14. Jack Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

Two passages in Matthew 16 illustrate this. In the question Jesus put to Peter concerning His identity, Matthew wrote, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (16:13), while Mark has, "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29), and Luke has, "Who do the crowds say I am?" (Luke 9:18). A few verses later Matthew recorded Jesus' first prediction of His impending death with the words, "He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things" (Matt. 16:21), while Mark and Luke wrote, "the Son of Man must suffer many things" (Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22).

That the gospel writers exercised comparative freedom in interchanging the designation "Son of Man" with a personal pronoun does not mean the title had no theological significance for them. It means only that they had no doubt that readers would know that the designation applied to Jesus alone. The theological background to the term is likely found in Daniel 7:13–14, based on Jesus' statement at His trial before the Sanhedrin: "You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64).

This passage neatly illustrates the dual significance of the designation as it is used in Matthew (and in the other Synoptic Gospels). Jesus was in the midst of the humiliation that would culminate in the cross; yet He referred to His future exaltation. Most of the other uses of this designation in the Gospel fall into one or the other of these categories, either the present humiliation of the Son of Man or His future exaltation in which He will manifest the prerogatives of deity. The reader of the gospel of Matthew can thus see in the use of this designation of Jesus that both aspects, the humiliation and the exaltation, are experiences of Jesus. These two experiences are temporally differentiated, however, so that humiliation characterized for the most part the course of His earthly life. But after the resurrection Jesus entered into His exalted role. All authority in heaven and on earth is given to Him (28:18), though the earthly manifestation of that exalted glory will be fully displayed only at His second coming. "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (24:30). The assurance of this ultimate vindication despite the reality of His present humiliation may explain Jesus' preference for this enigmatic expression as His self-designation of choice, a title which in some measure captures the enigma of the Incarnation: God became man to be ultimately hailed as Lord of all.

"LORD"

One might be inclined to think that of all the designations applied to Jesus, the title "Lord" would connote as clearly as any the reality of His deity. In English translations of the gospel, this is probably true. But the Greek word *kyrios*, translated "Lord," has a broader range of meaning. It can be used simply as a term of courteous respect. For example, when the chief priests and the Pharisees came to Pilate to request that a guard be placed at Jesus' tomb, the report of their petition began with the (vocative of) address *kyrie*, which English translations appropriately render "Sir" (27:63). The Jews were not portrayed as according divine prerogatives to Pilate; they simply addressed him with respect.

On the other hand, *kyrios* is customarily used as the title of God in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, so that Old Testament citations in the gospel commonly refer to God in this way. This "divine" usage is significant in light of Jesus' discussion with the Pharisees about His sonship. The question is posed this way: "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" (22:42). When they rightly answered that He is David's son, Jesus posed a conundrum for them, based on Psalm 110:1: "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."' If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" (Matt. 22:43–45). The superiority of Christ to David is certainly affirmed here, and the implication of Christ's deity, in view of the play on "Lord," is seen as well.

That Matthew saw divine prerogatives associated with the title "Lord" are clear from two passages concerned with Jesus as the Judge who determines individuals' destinies. According to 7:22, many will profess allegiance to Jesus and be numbered among His followers but they will ultimately be banished from His presence. "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (7:22–23)

In this context, calling Jesus "Lord" formally identifies these individuals as followers of Christ, but ultimately this profession of faith is shown by their deeds to be false. It is noteworthy that the deeds that betray their false profession are not the miraculous and the spectacular. Their claims with regard to these deeds are not denied. Rather, they have not done the will of God (v. 21); the apparently prosaic and unspectacular deeds have been left undone. What that might mean is illustrated in part by the second passage of relevance to Jesus as Lord and ultimate Judge.

The account of the judgment of the nations, compared to a separation of sheep from goats, is also a passage distinctive to Matthew's gospel (25:31–46). Here too Jesus as the Judge of all humankind is hailed as "Lord" by both the blessed (v. 34) and the cursed (v. 41). What is cited as evidence for the reality of that profession is the attention given to those whom Jesus called "the least of these brothers of mine" (v. 40), with whom He identified so that He could speak of acts done to them as done to Him (cf. 10:42). Though the cursed hail Jesus as "Lord," they show by their deeds that they are not His sheep.

That both the blessed and the cursed acknowledge Jesus as Lord coheres with the conviction that "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:9–11). "Lord," therefore, is a title associated with Jesus' exercise of divine prerogatives, suggestive of His deity.

"Lord" is also the designation Matthew seemed to regard as most appropriate on the lips of disciples. In addition to the two passages discussed above, comparison with two accounts also recorded by Mark and Luke illustrates this. The first is in the account of the stilling of the storm on the sea of Galilee (Matt. 8:23–27;

Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25). Although Jesus was with them, asleep in the boat, the disciples, afraid of perishing, called to Him for help. But each writer recorded a different form of address: for Luke, it is “Master” (Luke 8:24); Mark used “Teacher” (Mark 4:38); and Matthew wrote “Lord” (Matt. 8:25).

The same pattern occurs in the account of Jesus’ transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–10; Luke 9:28–36). At the appearance of Moses and Elijah in conversation with Jesus, Peter made a proposal. Again, each writer recorded a different form of address consistent with what was used earlier: for Luke it is “Master” (Luke 9:33); for Mark, “Rabbi,” a synonym for “Teacher” (Mark 9:5); and Matthew used “Lord” (Matt. 17:4).

Matthew seems to have been saying to his readers that a most suitable way to address Jesus is to call him “Lord.” This title acknowledges both Jesus’ authority and the responsibility disciples have to obey His commands (28:20).

OTHER DESIGNATIONS AND ROLES

This brief survey of names and titles or designations given to Jesus in the gospel of Matthew is not intended to suggest that understanding these alone will give exhaustive insight into His character and person. They represent but one avenue by which a reader may gain an appreciation for His life and ministry and in turn make an appropriate response. What Jesus said and how He conducted Himself are obviously also a crucial part of the process by which disciples form a right assessment of the Teacher and Master they are to emulate (10:25).

The mention of the role of teacher is a good example of this. Although Jesus was often called “Teacher” by those outside the circle of disciples (8:19; 9:11; 12:38; 17:24; 19:16) or addressed as “Rabbi” on two occasions by Judas (26:25, 49), Matthew never had the disciples referring to Jesus in this way. Yet it is clear that Matthew regarded Jesus as a teacher, or better “the Teacher,” in view of the fact that he recorded Jesus applying this title to Himself on two occasions (23:10; 26:18)¹⁵ and included in his gospel extended sections of Jesus’ teaching. Matthew introduced his record of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, for example, with the words “He began to teach them” (5:2), and Matthew noted at the conclusion of the sermon that “the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority” (7:28–29). Clearly Jesus is a Teacher without peer, though in Matthew’s gospel no disciple ever called him “Teacher.”

The same is true regarding the designation “Servant.” Jesus is never specifically called a “Servant,” but the text of Isaiah 42:1–4 (“Here is my servant whom I have chosen,” author’s trans.) is applied to Him in connection with His healing ministry (Matt. 12:18–21). In addition, Isaiah 53:4 is cited in regard to Him in Matthew 8:17, also in connection with His ministry of healing. And Isaiah 53 may form

15. The usual word for “teacher,” *didaskalos*, also occurs in Matthew 23:8. It probably is a reference to Jesus as well, although the fact that the Father is mentioned in verse 9, and Christ in verse 10, might suggest that the teacher of verse 8 is understood to be the Holy Spirit. The word in verse 10 to describe Christ as teacher, *kathēgētēs*, occurs only here in the New Testament.

the backdrop to His statement that the Son of Man “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Though the extent to which this portrait of Jesus is influenced by the Servant of Isaiah may be debated, it is clear that Matthew showed Jesus as One who was a servant. And Matthew set forth His example as a model for disciples to follow.¹⁶

Some interpreters of the gospel also think Matthew presented Jesus as the “Wisdom” of God, applying to Jesus a personification found in Proverbs 8:12–36 and developed in Jewish intertestamental literature (such as the Old Testament apocryphal book, Sirach).¹⁷ If the support for this identification is not entirely convincing, it is nevertheless true that Jesus’ manner of life illustrates the principles of wisdom, the application of God’s revelation to the situations of daily life and, like wisdom, He invites others to emulate His manner of life (Matt. 11:28–30, cf. Sirach 51:23–30).

Matthew’s portrait of Jesus ably shows Him to be “gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29), a description underscored by applying the words of Isaiah (42:2–3) to Him: “He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Matt. 12:19–20). Yet Matthew also showed Jesus, even in His humility, as One already exercising great authority so that disease (8:1–4), infirmity (vv. 5–13), sickness (vv. 14–15), demons (v. 16), the powers of the natural world (vv. 23–27), and death itself (9:18–26) submitted to His bidding.

To what extent these deeds are intended to be glimpses of His own authority (which the subsequent “investiture” at His resurrection simply acknowledges as now operative on a wider scale, 28:18), or whether they are meant to be seen as deeds done by means of the Spirit’s power (12:28), is perhaps a question Matthew would regard as moot or inconsequential, if not simply pedantic. But the coming of the Spirit on Jesus at His baptism (3:16) and the pronouncement of God (v. 17) appear to be a commission and endowment with authority,¹⁸ subsequently seen and acknowledged as from God (9:8). But trying to distinguish divine authority and the ministry of the Spirit may go beyond what it is necessary to know. Still, though references to the Spirit are relatively rare in Matthew’s gospel, it is a subject of importance to consider.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

References to the Spirit occur only twelve times altogether in Matthew’s gospel, with one-third of them in chapter 12. As might be expected in a gospel

16. The conjunction, “just as” (*hōsper*), which begins 20:28, introduces an example in light of the preceding admonition in verses 26–27.

17. Jack Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew’s Gospel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ., 1970); Frederick Burnett, *The Testament of Jesus-Sophia* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ., 1981); cf. Celia Deutsch, *Hidden Wisdom and the Easy Yoke* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield, 1987).

18. The pronouncement draws on two passages (Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1) which relate to the onset of divinely appointed roles.

concerned to interpret the significance of the life and ministry of Jesus, most of the references describe the work of the Spirit in relation to Him.

Mention has already been made of those references that speak of the Spirit as the life-imparting agent in Jesus' birth (1:18, 20). So too some consideration has been given to the significance of the coming of the Spirit on Jesus at the beginning of His public ministry (3:16; 12:18). In the only specific comment of Jesus about the relationship of the Spirit to His ministry, He attributed His performance of exorcisms to the agency of the Spirit: "I drive out demons by the Spirit of God" (12:28).¹⁹ Whether this statement can be extrapolated to explain the performance of all His miraculous deeds may be debated, but there is nothing theologically problematic in doing so nor is it inconsistent with the portrait of Jesus in the wider context of the New Testament.²⁰

In one of John the Baptist's announcements about Jesus, John told the people that Jesus "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:11). It is possible that the association of fire with the Spirit is a reference to a cleansing or purifying work which the Spirit will accomplish. More likely, however, in view of the following verse (v. 12), which refers to burning chaff with unquenchable fire, two broadly summarizing aspects of Jesus' work are in view. John's statement appears to bring together distinguishing features of Jesus' first and second coming.²¹ The baptism of the Spirit is associated with the blessings of salvation, and fire represents the awful destiny of those sent from the presence of Jesus the Judge (13:40–42; 25:41). The alternative experiences open to all humankind are thus represented in the references to the Spirit and fire.

John did not say when Jesus will baptize with the Spirit. A conclusion about this relates, in part, to some of the discussion earlier on the relationship of Jesus' authority to the role of the Spirit. While readers of the New Testament might be inclined to think that the baptism of the Spirit predicted by John was fulfilled initially at Pentecost (Acts 2) and thereafter in conjunction with the experience of conversion (1 Cor. 12:13), it may be that a preliminary or provisional "baptism" of the Spirit is associated with the disciples' commission to extend Jesus' ministry to Israel.

19. This quotation is drawn from the first part of a conditional statement ("if . . . then"), but it is clearly a proposition which hearers and readers are expected to regard as true.
20. Philippians 2:7, for example, refers to Jesus "making himself nothing." The statement might also be translated, "emptied himself" (NASB), in willingly becoming a man. The Greek word *keneō* has been taken to describe the decision by the Son willingly to forego the use of His own divine prerogatives in His incarnation. Thus when the disciples asked Jesus about the time of the end, this had not been revealed to the Son, who refused to avail Himself of His divine power and replied in effect, "I do not know" (Matt. 24:36).
21. It is possible that John himself did not recognize any temporal distinctions in the fulfillment of Jesus' work. This fact may account for his question concerning Jesus' messiahship (11:2–3). Languishing in prison, John may well have wondered why the vindication of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked did not proceed at a more rapid pace.

Matthew's account of this occurs in his tenth chapter. In the first verse he recorded that Jesus "gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Matt. 10:1; cf. v. 8). Presumably the means by which the disciples were able to do this was the same as that of Jesus—the Holy Spirit (12:28)—though this is not explicitly stated at this point in the narrative.²² However, the provision of the Spirit is mentioned later in the discourse in connection with the assurance that the disciples need not worry about how they should respond if they were arraigned before Jewish or Gentile courts because of their ministry (10:17–20).

The mention here of this ministry of the Spirit might be a further indication that the Spirit is indeed provisionally given in the course of this first mission of the disciples. A cautionary factor in coming too easily to that conclusion, however, relates to the fact that Jesus' instructions about the missionary enterprise that disciples are to undertake seems to anticipate a wider mission than the first one on which they were sent. In this first commission the disciples were to restrict their ministry to Israel (10:5), but the assurance of the Spirit's aid is in connection with witness before Gentile courts as well (v. 18). Jesus' remarks, therefore, seem to anticipate future missions, and it may be that some of these warnings and promises are meant to be construed in light of Pentecost.

The role of the Spirit as central to the missionary enterprise and indeed to the experience of forgiveness is made clear by what is said concerning blasphemy of the Spirit: "Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (12:31–32).

These verses have understandably troubled readers of the gospel for a number of different reasons. First, one may wonder what constitutes blasphemy, or speaking against the Spirit, since it is never defined. Second, given the lack of definition, how can one know whether such an act has been committed, even inadvertently, and so become guilty of a sin for which there is no forgiveness?

In answering questions of this sort several factors are relevant. For one thing, an awareness of the immediate context of the statement is essential to a proper understanding of its meaning. In this case Jesus had been accused of carrying out His ministry of exorcism by means of Satan (12:24), which amounted to a repudiation of Him and His message.

A second factor of relevance concerns what information the wider context of the Scriptures might bring to bear on the interpretation of any given passage. One aspect of the ministry of the Spirit is to bear witness to Christ. This is evident from Matthew's gospel since the deeds Jesus did by means of the Spirit attested to His

22. There is no indication that Judas was precluded from this privilege. By all appearances he too was able to perform miracles. This would then be one illustration of the situation envisioned in 7:21–23. If, as seems likely, these miracles were done by means of the Spirit, it also sheds light on a passage like Hebrews 6:4, where those who have "shared" in the Holy Spirit may nonetheless find themselves numbered among the lost.

messiahship. When John sent emissaries to question Jesus about His messiahship, Jesus replied by pointing to the things He had done (11:2–6). Therefore, to deny that these deeds are done by the Spirit and are thus authenticating of Jesus is ultimately to reject Him as the emissary of God and to cut oneself off from the salvation He provides.

Of relevance also is the fact that what Jesus said here, He gave by way of warning. This is not presented as a pronouncement of doom at this point, even against those who have made this preliminary judgment regarding Jesus. It is a warning that to persist in this judgment is ultimately to reject the witness of the Spirit concerning Jesus, an act that leads to perdition for its advocates. This seems to be the focus of the passage.

If that is so, it is doubtful that anyone who is concerned about committing this sin has reason to be so. And concerning others it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine when someone reaches the point of fully and finally rejecting the ministry of the Spirit concerning Jesus. Suffice it to say, however, that those who have come to this point are unlikely to be worried about it. Anxiety about eternal destiny is not a characteristic typically associated with the lost. As Matthew reminded the readers of his gospel, “In the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and . . . that is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man” (24:38–39).

This is not to say that people cannot cross a line from which there is no going back. Judas may be a case in point of one who did (27:3–4), and the writer of Hebrews (6:4–6) may be warning about this as well. But it is unlikely that Matthew included this passage about rejecting the witness of the Spirit as a word of condemnation delivered after the fact. It is rather a word of warning that the testimony of the Spirit about Jesus must not be rejected.

Two final passages regarding the role of the Spirit may be noted, before some concluding observations on this aspect of Matthew’s theology are made. The Spirit’s role in the inspiration of Scripture is referred to in 22:43, where David’s statement in Psalm 110:1 is attributed to “speaking by the Spirit.” And the personality of the Holy Spirit, in equality with God the Father and God the Son, is expressed in Jesus’ command to baptize disciples “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (28:19). Baptism is a visual testimony to a disciple’s entrance into a relationship with the triune God.

This is an appropriate place to consider Jesus’ two affirmations about His presence with His disciples, since the Spirit seems to be the unmentioned agent of this presence. In 18:20, Matthew recorded this statement by Jesus, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” This statement clearly anticipated Jesus’ absence physically while affirming His presence spiritually. Similarly, the concluding statement of the gospel is Jesus’ word of assurance: “I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:20). If one asks how or in what sense Jesus is present with His disciples, the answer would seem to be that it is by means of the Holy Spirit. Here then is another illustration of the ministry of the

Spirit in pointing to Christ. Though physically absent, Jesus is present by means of the Spirit, who bears witness to Him and continues to extend ministry to others in His behalf.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN/GOD

Before noting what Matthew wrote about “the kingdom of heaven,” or “the kingdom of God,” some consideration needs to be given to the meaning of the terms themselves. Normally the English word “kingdom” denotes the idea of a physical or spatial realm, a region, including people and land, over which a king exercises authority. This meaning also applies to the words used for “kingdom” in the Old and New Testaments.

However, “kingdom” can also refer to the exercise of rulership or authority. In this use of the term there is more of a dynamic or active sense, referring to the imposition of the will of the ruler or his sovereignty over his subjects. The word thus has both a static or spatial idea associated with it and also a dynamic or spiritual sense. The English word “dominion” might illustrate these senses, since it can be used for both the exercise of authority and a region or realm in which this authority is exercised.

It is not always clear if one or the other or both aspects of the meaning of “kingdom” are referred to in a particular Bible passage. At the end of Psalm 103, for example, this statement appears: “The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all” (103:19). But another translation renders the second part of the verse this way: “His sovereignty rules over all” (NASB). This second translation makes good sense in view of the following verses which refer to angels who “obey his word” (v. 20) and “servants who do his will” (v. 21). Yet some sense of spatial significance is suggested as well by the subsequent phrase, “everywhere in his dominion” (v. 22). Thus both aspects of the word may be relevant in a particular passage, though one sense may predominate in any given instance.

There is also a temporal duality associated with the use of the word in the Old and New Testaments. Usually the kingdom of God is spoken of as a present reality. According to the psalmist, for example, “All you have made will praise you, O Lord; your saints will extol you. They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom” (Ps. 145:10–12).

But in other passages a future kingdom, or what might better be described as a future manifestation of God’s kingdom, is referred to. Isaiah looked forward to one who “will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (Isa. 9:7). And Daniel recorded a vision of “one like a son of man . . . and to him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the people, nations and men of every language might serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and his kingdom is one which will not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13–14).

Similar meanings are associated with what Matthew has said about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of the Son of Man. But before some of those particular statements are examined, a general comment about an expression that is distinctive to Matthew's gospel is in order. The concern is his use of the phrase "kingdom of heaven" in passages where Mark or Luke in their accounts refer to the "kingdom of God" (e.g., Matt. 13:31; Mark 4:30; Luke 13:18).

The use of a passive verb to describe the action of God was previously noted as one way a reverential Jew could describe something God had done without mentioning His name (since the subject is more easily omitted with a passive verb). The substitution of "heaven," the abode of God in place of the name of God, is another form of this reverence. Only in Matthew's gospel does this phrase occur. He also used the expression "kingdom of God" four times (12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43), however, thus suggesting that the difference in nomenclature is more a matter of preference or deference than anything else.

Why "the kingdom of heaven" is mentioned routinely in Matthew's gospel but never in the others is uncertain. Probably Jesus used both expressions, but Mark and Luke simply chose to use consistently the phrase "kingdom of God" because it was less ambiguous for Gentile readers than the more Jewish expression, "kingdom of heaven." It is clear that Matthew regarded the two phrases as virtually synonymous from a passage like 19:23–24, where Jesus said to the disciples, "It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven . . . it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Unlike many of the Old Testament passages that refer to the kingdom of God as a present reality, the references in Matthew's gospel generally have in view either a kingdom yet future or an entrance into the kingdom which is yet future. However, one passage that refers to the kingdom as a present reality is 12:28, with Jesus' statement about His exorcisms: "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

The statement is phrased in the form of a conditional proposition, but the conclusion is clear enough. Even the Pharisees conceded that Jesus drove out demons (12:24). The dispute concerns the means. They said it was done by Satan, but Jesus said it was done by the Holy Spirit. Of course, Matthew left no doubt about which contention is correct. Jesus was driving out demons by means of the Holy Spirit. If that is so, said Jesus, then the kingdom has come.

The verb "has come" (*ephthasen*) is written in the past tense. While it is true in the case of Greek verbs generally that the tense is more significant with regard to the way the action of a verb is portrayed than the time frame in which it is depicted,²³ it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the past tense verb here also affirms that the kingdom of God was somehow present in the ministry of Jesus.

23. The verb *ephthasen* (the present tense or lexical form is *phthanō*) is written in the aorist tense (and the indicative mood, the form normally used to make an assertion or statement). The aorist is probably the least significant of the tenses in the way the action of the verb is portrayed (rivaled perhaps by the future) since it is commonly used to assert only that something happened.

But in what sense was the kingdom of God present? Probably in the way envisioned by the psalmist when he said, “that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom” (Ps. 145:12). In Jesus’ ministry the power of the Spirit gave expression to and demonstrated the authority of God. God’s sovereign rule was manifested in the ministry of Jesus. Because of this those who witnessed Jesus’ ministry and heard His message were at the same time confronted with a call to submit to the rule and reign of God, to enter, in that sense, into the kingdom of God, where those who are God’s servants carry out His will.

Seen in this light, the announcement of John the Baptist that the kingdom of God was near or close at hand (*engiken*, 3:2),²⁴ is also understandable. John sought to prepare people to hear and respond to the message and ministry of Jesus by calling for repentance. In this regard John’s ministry was a reminder of a truth formerly expressed: “a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). John wanted to bring people to a place of repentance, an admission of spiritual impotence and an acknowledgment of the fact that purity of heart is the work of God alone. In a similar way Jesus (Matt. 4:17), the disciples (10:7), and later missionaries like Paul (Acts 28:31; cf. 20:21) preached a comparable “gospel of the kingdom” (24:14).

That the kingdom of God, as God’s rule and reign, existed before the ministry of Jesus is at least implied in the parable of the tenants (21:33–41), which depicts Israel’s insolence and selfishness in routinely rejecting the owner’s servants, culminated in killing the owner’s son (cf. 23:37). Jesus then told the leaders of Israel that “the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit” (21:43).

Apparently this means that Israel’s stewardship of the kingdom in her role as the representative and proclaimer of God’s rule and reign, was being taken away and given to others. Further attention will be given to this passage subsequently when the respective situations of Israel and the church are considered. For now it is enough to observe that the notion of the kingdom of God is not depicted as a recent phenomenon in God’s dealing with Israel. They have been long-standing beneficiaries of the blessings of God’s realm, yet have offered little more than animosity and hostility in return.²⁵

If the notion of the kingdom was not new to Israel, John’s remarks about the nearness of the kingdom (3:2) nonetheless suggest that a distinctive stage in that unfolding drama was dawning in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus’ statement that “from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully

24. The verb used here, *engizō*, can refer to someone or something which comes near in a temporal and/or spatial sense. Both of these ideas are illustrated in Matthew 26:45–46. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus warned His disciples of His impending betrayal with the words “Look, the hour is near [*engiken*], and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (v. 45). In the next verse He said of Judas, “Here comes [*engiken*] my betrayer” (v. 46).

25. That Jews thought of themselves as “subjects of the kingdom” is illustrated by Jesus’ words in Matthew 8:12.

advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it" (11:12)²⁶ seems to reinforce that idea, although John's own place in relation to this new era is debated. For example, Jesus gave John the highest commendation when He said, "among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (11:11a). Then Jesus added, "yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (v. 11b).

Does this mean that although John introduced this new phase of the kingdom, he was not himself a participant in it?²⁷ Probably not. While John was something of a hinge figure in the unfolding plan of God, the view that he was on one side or the other of an exact dividing line between successive eras likely reflects more a modern predilection for systemization than a distinction which the gospel writer himself maintained.²⁸ The point rather seems to be that although John could in one sense be regarded as a person without peer because of his role as the herald of the Messiah, to be a participant in the kingdom and a beneficiary of the blessings of God is in reality a far greater privilege. And yet to frame the comparison in this way does not necessarily signify that John was not a beneficiary of the latter blessing as well.

The kingdom can in fact rather broadly describe the blessings of God associated with salvation. In some passages, for example, entering the kingdom and gaining eternal life are treated as synonymous experiences. A rich young man asked Jesus what he must do to "get eternal life" (19:16). When he left, Jesus told His disciples that "it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven . . . it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (vv. 23–24). In the account of the judgment of the Son of Man, the blessed are told to take their inheritance, "the kingdom prepared for you" (25:34) which at the end of the discourse is described as "eternal life" (v. 46). In that light, the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of the pearl are understandable (13:44–46). Eternal life is a treasure of infinite value, a possession worth selling all that one has in order to obtain it (a fact the rich man could not accept).

The "knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (13:11) which had been given to the disciples thus amounts to a revelation of the truth of the gospel in relation to what God was doing in and through the life of Jesus. When heard and understood, the "message about the kingdom" (13:19) produces fruit in individual

26. The meaning of two words in this verse (the verb *biazetai* and its cognate noun, *biastai*), is debated. Are they to be taken in a negative or a positive sense? The NIV takes both as positive ("forcefully advancing" and "forceful men"). The NASB takes both as negative ("suffers violence" and "violent men"). Usage of the words elsewhere generally favors the NASB translation. But the parallel saying in Luke 16:16 and the idea that the kingdom of God is a power that cannot be deterred support a positive construal, at least of the first part of the statement.

27. See Richard France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 197–98.

28. Most interpreters have an understandable interest in specificity and exactness. It must be balanced, however, by a concern not to go beyond the statements of the verses themselves. Similarly, a desire for categorical or systematic neatness, though pedagogically welcome, is ultimately counterproductive if it misconstrues or exaggerates the message of the gospel writer.

lives (v. 23).²⁹ The term “kingdom” can thus be used rather broadly to describe the experience of salvation.

To enter into the kingdom of God is similar to entering into the experience of salvation. Both have spiritual and material implications, but the material aspects are thought of primarily in reference to a future experience. The expectation of receiving a transformed and glorified body is one illustration of this (e.g., Phil. 3:21). Paul, for example, referred to redemption as a present reality achieved by the death of Christ (Rom. 3:24), while at the same time recognizing that there is an aspect of the experience of redemption which awaits a future consummation, the redemption of the body (Rom. 8:23). There is thus what has been described as a “now, not yet” aspect associated with salvation as it is set forth in the New Testament.

This is also true with regard to the understanding of the kingdom of God. There is a present aspect related to the reality of entering into the sphere of God’s rule and reign, which in one’s present experience is for the most part a spiritual reality. But the future will also show that the kingdom of God has physical and material dimensions.

Jesus’ comments about dining in the kingdom certainly point in that direction. He told a centurion that “many will come from the east and west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 8:11). And to His disciples, at the conclusion of their last supper together, He said, “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom” (26:29).

Similar material implications arise in connection with statements made about the future kingdom of the Son of Man. The existence and manifestation of this kingdom parallels Jesus’ exercise of authority, so it too can be spoken of as having been present in Jesus’ earthly ministry though its primary manifestation awaits His second coming.

That Jesus was invested with the power and authority of the Holy Spirit at the outset of His ministry has already been mentioned. Yet the final scene of the gospel alludes to Jesus’ “formal” investiture with authority as the risen and exalted Son (28:18). On several occasions this authority and its future manifestation to all people is described. In His examination before the Jewish authorities, Jesus warned the high priest, as the representative of the Jewish people, that they would witness a visible display of His authority at His second coming (26:64). To His disciples earlier He referred to not just Israel but the world generally as a witness to His return in exaltation: “The Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” (24:30).

29. Jesus’ word about doing the will of God (7:21) is relevant to the question of what constitutes “fruit.” Some details regarding ethical matters in Matthew will be offered later in this chapter. For now, Paul’s word to the Romans that the kingdom of God is a matter of “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17) can serve as a brief illustration of representative “fruit.”

The beginnings of the kingdom of the Son of Man seem to coincide with the onset of Jesus' ministry. The explanation of the parable of the weeds (13:36–43) points in this direction as well. The Son of Man's field is the world in which He sows His disciples, the "sons of the kingdom" (v. 38). The devil is also active, sowing "the sons of the evil one" (vv. 38–39). But a separation will take place at "the end of the age" (v. 39) when "the Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil" (v. 41). The last verse of Matthew's gospel records Jesus' promise to the disciples that He will be with them to "the very end of the age" (28:20), when He will return. The explanation of the parable, therefore, seems to be a description of the situation that exists in the interim, when the kingdom of the Son of Man is also present.

Jesus' words at the end of chapter 19, however, point to the period which follows His return, and give some indication of the situation that will exist when the Son of Man visibly establishes His rule. The discourse is precipitated by the question of Peter who rightly declared that unlike the rich young man (19:16–22) the disciples "have left everything" to follow Jesus (v. 27).³⁰ "What," he asks then, "will there be for us?" (v. 27).

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits upon his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (19:28). And as if to stress that the disciples' material sacrifice will be more than compensated for by the situation that will result, He added these words: "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (19:29). The nature and grandeur of the recompense seems clear, even if the exact contours of it remain undefined.

That the disciples will be in a position to exercise authority in relation to the nation of Israel is affirmed, which implies the existence of both the nation and a context in which that rule can be manifest. Jesus' words here thus point toward a period following His return in which His rule and that of His disciples will be manifested in relation to the nation of Israel. This assertion has obvious significance for Matthew's viewpoint on the future of Israel, a subject which will be discussed later. For now, it may be seen to give material definition to that period which will follow Jesus' return, a period in which the kingdom of the Son of Man will be brought to completion.

The kingdom of the Son of Man thus appears to be one aspect of the earlier and more encompassing kingdom of God. Jesus as the Son of Man will be the focus of a particular era in the unfolding kingdom of God, but the kingdom is not exhausted by what Jesus says and does. Ultimately, the end of Christian experience is

30. In this respect the disciples illustrate the point of the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of the pearl (13:44–46). In contrast to the rich young man, they "sold everything" to follow Jesus. For an indication of the conceptual association of "following Jesus" and "obtaining the kingdom," compare Matthew 19:29 and Luke 18:30.

described in words influenced by Daniel 12:3: "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt. 13:43). The words of Paul to the Corinthians echo a similar refrain: "Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. . . . When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:24, 28). In the end, God reigns.

The phrase "the kingdom of God" is thus a designation with some flexibility, whose features compare in some respects with what later literature in the New Testament relates to the experience of salvation. The difference is that the tenor of the remarks about the kingdom of God remind the readers that their focus is to be ultimately God and what He or His Son does. Discussion of salvation, on the other hand, more easily can focus on the object, people, rather than the subject, God, who does the saving. In that respect, talk about the kingdom of God is a healthy reminder of the proper focus of Christian living: "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (6:33).

MISSION

The subject of mission in Matthew is an appropriate point of transition for moving from discussion about God and His work to the disciples and their work, since the topic concerns an object, subject, and motivation which bring together God, His people, and those in need of salvation. It is also, by common consent, an issue of paramount importance to Matthew, shown by the place it occupies at the culmination of his gospel.

Jesus' command, which occupies center stage as Matthew brought his gospel to a close, is the mandate to "go and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). The context in which these last words are placed has the effect of making this commission a self-perpetuating decree since Jesus stipulated that the process of making disciples should include "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (v. 20). Chief among the commands of Jesus which are to be taught and obeyed is the mission mandate.

Matthew had not waited until the end of his gospel to highlight the theme of mission in Jesus' teaching. Indeed, Jesus' first call to His disciples was a summons for them to join Him in the work of further disciple-making: "Come follow me . . . and I will make you fishers of men" (4:19). In this way the first and last words to His disciples became a command to enlarge and extend the company of their fellowship.

In each of the five major sections of the gospel which focus on presenting Jesus' teachings,³¹ there are passages of specific relevance to missionary endeavor.

31. These sections with representative titles are as follows: (1) The Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7), (2) The Missionary Discourse (chap. 10), (3) The Parables Discourse (13:1-53), (4) The Ecclesiastical (or Community) Discourse (chap. 18), and (5) The Eschatological (or Olivet) Discourse (chaps. 24-25).

The second discourse (chap. 10, to which 9:35–38 is a prologue) is entirely given over to instructions and statements related to this theme. The importance of this subject for Matthew is clear.

For example, there is much in the first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount, that has relevance for those involved in disciple-making, not the least of which is information about the character and behavior expected of disciples. The Beatitudes (5:3–10) provide help in this way, as do the so-called antitheses (“you have heard . . . but I tell you,” 5:21–48) and the discussion about true righteousness (6:1–18) which follows. In between these sections, however, is another passage that constitutes a commission in miniature, the declaration that disciples are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (5:13–16).

Salt and light are objects associated in the Old Testament with God’s blessing. Though salt is a somewhat more enigmatic image, it is identified with God’s covenant and prescribed as a regular element in worship (Lev. 2:13). The reference to the disciples as the light of the world is probably based on the role of the Servant of Isaiah: “I will also make you a light for the nations that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49:6).³² These associations thus serve to remind the disciples whom they represent and what it is they mediate, namely, the salvation of God.

These statements, however, are also an affirmation that the disciples’ realm of service is universal in its scope. The earth—the world—is the sphere of ministry for Jesus’ followers. Jesus called them to be “fishers of men” without qualification concerning race or language. Although they were sent first to their kinsmen in Israel (10:5–6), these early references to the disciples’ mission show that the commission to all nations which concludes the gospel is no afterthought or alternative plan but defines the original scope and intended sphere of ministry for disciples of Jesus.

One other passage in this first discourse may be mentioned as particularly relevant to disciples involved in missionary activity. That is, Jesus’ words about avoiding worry with regard to the necessities of life (6:25–34). It is obviously a message of relevance to people generally, but one which is particularly applicable to disciples who will carry out ministry in accord with Jesus’ directions recorded in chapter 10. He instructed them to make no material provision for themselves (10:9–10), but to rely on the hospitality of those who would receive their ministry (v. 11). Worry about one’s welfare is understandable in view of such prospects or circumstances. Yet Jesus’ words directed His disciples to be confident in God’s knowledgeable care for them (6:31–32), thus freeing them to focus on the object of their calling—the advance of His kingdom and the accomplishment of His will (v. 33; cf. vv. 9–10).

The missionary activity of the disciples is the primary focus of the discourse in chapter 10. It is introduced by Jesus’ expression of concern for the Jewish peo-

32. Light is also expressive of both the blessing of God’s salvation and the righteousness it engenders (Isa. 62:1), though the imagery in Matthew likely evokes the Servant of Isaiah. Isaiah 49:6 is applied also to the ministry of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:47), and Jesus is “the light of the world” (John 9:5).

ple, whom He described with words drawn from the Old Testament (Num. 27:17; 2 Chron. 18:16) as “sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). The initial focus of the disciples’ ministry, like that of Jesus’ ministry (15:24), was the people of Israel (“Go to the lost sheep of Israel,” 10:6), but the references to ministry before Gentiles (10:18) implies that the broader audience of the world generally had not been lost sight of. Indeed, Jesus’ exhortation to “ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field” (9:38) likely has in view the world generally as God’s field (cf. 5:45). But readers will soon see that the world is also the field of the Son of Man in which He sows the sons of the kingdom (13:38); and in His role as the One to whom all authority has been given (28:18), He will see that workers are sent into the field (vv. 19–20).

Chapter 10, however, is primarily concerned with the disciples’ mission to Israel. It is sometimes taken as a description of an early concern for ministry to Jews which was later superseded by the mission to the world with which the gospel concludes. Some go so far as to say that Matthew regarded this ministry to Israel portrayed in chapter 10 as an era that is past. Besides the disciples’ mission being broadened to encompass the world, Jews in this view are no longer regarded as those to whom the gospel should be preached.³³ Israel had her opportunity to listen and respond to the message of Jesus and the disciples, as chapter 10 shows. But for the most part Israel turned a deaf ear (as Matthew’s gospel also demonstrates), and so she was set aside as an object of mission.

That such a view is an incorrect interpretation of the missionary message of Matthew’s gospel will be set forth subsequently when the place of Israel in the plan of God is considered. Though the portrait of Israel’s unresponsiveness and rejection of Jesus and the disciples is unflinchingly drawn by Matthew, it is mistaken to think that he saw Israel as no longer an object of mission.

Rather, chapter 10 serves to underscore the priority of Israel in the missionary task, a fact understood by Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, who said that the gospel “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew and then for the Gentile” (Rom. 1:16). As seen in Acts, Paul routinely preached first to Jews in the cities he entered on his missionary journeys.

Several factors in Matthew’s gospel indicate that he had a similar view. For one thing, it is not just in Matthew 10 that concern for ministry to Israel is expressed. At the end of chapter 23, with its series of woes Jesus pronounced on the Jewish religious leaders, Matthew recorded Jesus’ affirmation that He would continue sending emissaries to Israel (23:34). The next chapter contains statements by Jesus in reply to the disciples’ questions about various matters, including the end of the age. Jesus told them that the gospel “will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (24:14). It is possible that the phrases “the whole world” and “all nations” do not include reference to Israel, but the wording is oddly expansive if that is the case.

33. Douglas Hare and David Harrington, “‘Make Disciples of All the Gentiles’ (Mt. 28:19),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37 (1975): 359–69.

One of the more difficult verses in chapter 10 seems also to point in the direction of a mission to Israel that will continue until Jesus returns. It too is preceded by warnings of persecution and a word of assurance concerning vindication,³⁴ after which Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes" (10:23). Although the coming of the Son of Man here has been subjected to some curious interpretations,³⁵ it seems best to see it as a reference to the same event described elsewhere in the gospel as occurring at the end of the age (24:26–31).³⁶ If so, Matthew may then have been interpreting this saying as a statement that the mission to Israel should be regarded as an ongoing enterprise, which only the return of Jesus at the end of the age will bring to a close. In light of this, it may be significant that Matthew did not include a report about the disciples' return from this mission and subsequent discussion with Jesus about it, as did Mark (6:30) and Luke (9:10). It may be a further (admittedly, rather subtle) indication that he regarded this mission to Israel as one that should continue.

Having discussed the subject of a mission to Jews, it may be appropriate to discuss the related question of what Matthew understood as the place or present status of Israel in the plan and purpose of God, since Israel for the most part rejected Jesus as the Messiah. It is a subject of no little controversy, particularly since Matthew has been seen as contributing to the anti-Semitism that has manifested itself at different times and in various places through the centuries.

ISRAEL

No one can deny that Matthew's gospel contains some scathing indictments of the Jewish religious leaders. Matthew 23 is almost wholly taken up with a litany of Jesus' woes against Israel's scribes and Pharisees, prompting one commentator to advise readers that "a Christian expositor is under no obligation to defend such a mass of vituperation."³⁷

Nor is that the end of the matter. Attention has previously been given to Jesus' declaration to the Jewish leaders that "the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (21:43). Earlier, Matthew re-

34. Similar warnings about persecution are recorded in 10:17–23 and 24:9–12, and the same statement assuring vindication is in 10:22 and 24:13.

35. This verse, for example, figured significantly in Albert Schweitzer's view that Jesus expected someone else to come as the Son of Man in the course of this first mission. Schweitzer regarded the fact that no one did as such a great disappointment to Jesus that it ultimately led him to the cross (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus* [London: Black, 1911], 358–60). More recently Donald Carson has taken this coming of the Son of Man to be an event fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 ("Matthew," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 8:253).

36. Only Matthew 16:28 seems to be a reference to an event other than the Second Coming since Jesus told His disciples that "some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." In all three Synoptic Gospels this statement is followed by an account of the Transfiguration, suggesting that this event should be understood as a "preview" of Jesus' glory. Second Peter 1:16–18 also supports this understanding.

37. Francis Beare, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 461.

corded Jesus' statement that "the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (8:12). On another occasion, when Jesus had taken issue with Jewish scruples about cleanliness, His disciples asked Him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" to which Jesus replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides" (15:12-14).

These seem to be trenchantly blunt statements suggesting that whatever place Israel may have occupied as the chosen people of God is now a thing of the past. When those statements are combined with the account of Israel's cry of responsibility in connection with the death of Christ, the consequence seems dreadfully clear: "Let his blood be upon us and on our children!" (27:25). Can there be any doubt that Matthew portrayed Israel as a hopelessly reprobate people?

Yes, there can. In fact, Matthew holds out hope that Israel will one day welcome Jesus as her Messiah. Several references in Matthew's gospel point in this direction. One is in chapter 1, where the angel of God spoke about the work Jesus would accomplish. The angel told Joseph that Jesus "will save his people from their sins" (1:21). One interpreter has concluded that "this can hardly be taken to mean Jewish people in the context of the first gospel,"³⁸ though he adduces no evidence for this contention, possibly because the particular term used here to refer to "people" (*laos*) is used on every other occasion in Matthew (thirteen times, in fact) to refer to Jews.

By itself this bit of linguistic data may be a matter of relatively little consequence. But the first instance of Matthew's formulaic Old Testament quotations in Matthew 2:6 also refers to Jesus as one "who will be the shepherd of my people Israel" (2 Sam. 5:2; 1 Chron. 11:2). Is "Israel" here a covert reference to the church, or did Jesus' ministry to Israel in His first coming fulfill the expectations of the text? The answer seems to be no on both counts. When Matthew used the term "Israel" (thirteen times), it always meant ethnic Israel. And Jesus can hardly be said to shepherd a people who refuse to acknowledge His leadership.

Are there any indications that Matthew harbored hope for the future conversion of Israel? Two verses help answer this question in the affirmative. One has already been mentioned in relation to the discussion about the future role of the Son of Man and His kingdom, referred to in 19:28. Jesus told the disciples that "when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." The repetition of the number twelve is significant here, particularly since Matthew knew that Judas was no longer a member of the apostolic band (cf. 28:16, "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee.").

The repeated reference to twelve draws attention to the twelve tribes, the complete company of the now scattered and dispersed nation of Israel. Jesus seems

38. Guenther Bornkamm, "The Risen Lord and the Earthly Jesus," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, 2d ed., ed. Guenther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held (London: SCM, 1982), 325.

to have been saying to His disciples that He will not fail to accomplish the task ordained for Him. He will save His people Israel. And He will become their shepherd in accord with the expectations established for Him.³⁹

This obviously did not take place at His first coming. Is there any other indication in the gospel that this will be accomplished at His second coming? Here a second text is relevant. The last word in that woeful chapter 23 is a word of hope. Jesus spoke to the city of Jerusalem, saying to her people, "You will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (23:39). These words, drawn from Psalm 118:26, look forward to the acknowledgment by Israel that Jesus is indeed the Christ of God.

The statement could be construed as a condition ("if you say, then you will see"), but the first and last verses are a reminder that a major aspect of the psalm is expression of praise to God for His faithfulness: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever" (Ps. 118:1, 29). And the general emphasis in the gospel concerning the faithfulness of God to His Word suggests that reading this quotation as a statement of assurance regarding Israel's future rightly apprehends the significance of these words.⁴⁰

If, then, Matthew saw that a mission to Israel is to continue until Jesus returns and also held out hope for the ultimate success of that mission, does his gospel have anything to say about the relationship of Jews and Christians generally? This is another question which is subject to debate. However, it can be approached from the vantage point of a discussion about the law in Matthew.

THE LAW

The subject of the law in Matthew raises some challenging questions, but before launching into any of these it will be helpful to take a moment to define the term itself. Normally, the term "law" refers to the legislative aspect of the Old Testament, primarily expressed in the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. The Sadducees, for example, held this part of the Bible to be authoritative in settling questions of theology and practice.⁴¹

The Pharisees, on the other hand, while accepting the authority of the Pentateuch and the rest of the Old Testament as important for theology and practice, looked with equal esteem to the scribal tradition of interpretation and application of the Scriptures. This tradition developed in response to questions about appropriate behavior on matters not specifically addressed by biblical texts.⁴²

39. The prophecy of Ezekiel is of interest in this connection, especially chapter 34, which speaks of God assembling the scattered flock of Israel (v. 12) and appointing over them David as shepherd (v. 23), who will rule in an era of abundant blessing (vv. 25–29) in accord with God's promise (vv. 31–32).

40. Also see David K. Lowery, "Evidence from Matthew," in *A Case for Premillennialism*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 165–80.

41. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.297.

42. *Ibid.*, 13.408.

In addition, the Pharisees recognized that the past national exiles were in part precipitated by the failure of Israel to live faithfully in accord with the Old Testament law which they had received. As a preventive against the repetition of such tragedies and to inculcate a concern for righteous living generally, the oral tradition also developed along lines that sought to protect people from ignorantly or unconsciously violating the law of God. This body of legal tradition could also be referred to as law, though in Matthew the term "tradition" (*paradosis*) is used to describe it (15:2–3, 6). The law thus normally refers to the legislative portion of the Old Testament.

Matthew's presentation of the issue of the law is fraught with intriguing tensions. For example, in the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus unequivocally stated that He had not come "to abolish the Law or the Prophets . . . but to fulfill them" (5:17). That seems to be a fairly clear statement about the continuing validity of the Old Testament generally, though one might say that the fulfillment of particular prophecies implies that in these cases, at least, immediate applicability has come to an end.⁴³

The next verse also seems to take a long-term view regarding the law's validity, stating that "until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (5:18). Again, the phrase "until everything is accomplished" may allow room for maneuvering on certain points, but the longevity implied by the fact that heaven and earth will be around for a little while longer (at least until Christ's return) is difficult to escape.

The next verse seems equally stringent and unequivocal: "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (5:19). It is possible that "these commandments" anticipated the teaching of Jesus which would shortly follow. However, the context more likely points in the direction of Old Testament commands, though Jesus' next words about the disciples' righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20) may be intended to orient the reader to the antitheses that follow (5:21–48). It is difficult to escape the notion, however, that these verses amount to a ringing endorsement of the law and an affirmation of its enduring validity.

One problem with this view, however, lies in the fact that the extracts of Jesus' teaching which follow (5:21–48) seem on several occasions to go either beyond the prescriptions of the Old Testament law or simply to set them aside as no longer applicable. The remarks about oaths (5:33–37), for example, end up setting aside various Old Testament prescriptions about taking and keeping oaths (e.g., Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:2–15; Deut. 23:21–23; Ps. 50:14) and enjoining instead a candid yes or no, adding that anything more "comes from the evil one" (Matt. 5:37).

43. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, for example, may be thought to have brought the prophecy in Micah 5:2 to an end by virtue of fulfillment (Matt. 2:6).

Of course, this might be seen as a positive way of saying that God is interested in integrity and simplicity in speech, while what the Old Testament legislation was concerned with was to limit duplicity. Jesus' teaching, therefore, represents the positive counterpart, the accomplishment of righteousness, in the face of the Old Testament attempt to limit evil. There is obviously something to this contention, but it is difficult to see how it does not in effect render obsolete certain portions of Old Testament legislation.

The same point of view appears in the next section which concerns the limits of retribution (5:38–42). The Old Testament stipulates retribution in what might be called retaliation in kind and degree: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21).⁴⁴ But Jesus proscribed retribution of any sort: evil deeds, He said, are not to be repaid in kind.⁴⁵ While this may be seen as a contrast between what was necessary to maintain the fabric of Old Testament society and the personal prerogatives open to those living in the era of the New Testament,⁴⁶ the fact remains that it produced a measure of tension with the contention that the law be fulfilled. Those familiar with the Old Testament who read Matthew 5 can be permitted a measure of bewilderment in sorting out the appropriate response to questions about the validity of the law for Jesus' disciples.

Before attempting a resolution of this issue, the question of the oral law and its treatment in Matthew can be added as a factor further complicating this quandary. In view of what Jesus said about the traditions of the Pharisees recorded in Matthew 15:1–20, the matter would seem to be clear-cut. In answer to His disciples' question about the Pharisees and their scruples Jesus said, "Leave them; they are blind guides" (v. 14).

But as a prefatory word to the pronouncement of the sevenfold woe on the scribes and Pharisees, Matthew recorded these words of Jesus "to the crowds and to his disciples: 'The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you'" (23:1–3). Later in the same chapter is a statement in line with the affirmations of 5:17–20. Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees, "You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former" (23:23).

What should a disciple conclude about personally observing the law? Further, what should a Jewish Christian disciple conclude about the propriety of a relation-

44. It is not that the Old Testament texts cited "permit" retribution; they positively enjoin it.

45. Cf. Romans 12:17–21.

46. The sermon is directed to individual disciples, setting forth a manner of life applicable to those who are emissaries of God. It does not address the question of appropriate behavior in the face of threat or harm that concerns the welfare of others. A father or husband concerned about the well-being of his family may need to act differently (cf., e.g., Paul's comments in 1 Cor. 7:32–35 about the constraints of family responsibilities), as would one involved in restraining evil as a social servant (Rom. 13:4). But the fact remains that Jesus exemplified this spirit of nonretaliation in the course of His life and ministry and seems to have held it forth as the proper course of action for those involved in ministry on His behalf.

ship with Judaism which requires observation of the Old Testament law and, for all practical purposes, attention to the oral law as well? In light of the statements Matthew recorded, are Jewish religious leaders to be abandoned or obeyed? Jesus' advice regarding payment of the temple tax (17:24–27) may point the way to one resolution of this dilemma.

The collection of this two-drachma tax was apparently based on the stipulation of Exodus 30:11–16 that each Jew twenty years of age and older should make a half shekel offering “for the service of the Tent of Meeting” (Ex. 30:16). The payment of a Greek double drachma coin met this obligation since it was more or less equivalent in value to the Jewish half shekel.⁴⁷ Though this poll tax or obligatory offering may have been sporadically assessed in the course of Israel's history,⁴⁸ it seems to be regarded as based on the law and therefore an obligation viewed as justly due of Jews in Jesus' day for the support of the temple service in Jerusalem.

Peter, at least, when questioned on this point by the tax collectors, had no hesitation in affirming that Jesus paid the tax. But later Jesus put a question to him: “What do you think Simon . . . from whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their sons or from others?” (17:25). “From others,” said Peter. “‘Then the sons are exempt,’ Jesus said to him. ‘But so that we may not offend them,’” He arranged (miraculously) for Peter to pay the tax on behalf of both of them (vv. 26–27).

In view of the way Jesus' reply to Peter is phrased, the sons who are exempt (*eleutheros*, “free” from obligation) refer to Jesus and Peter, the “we” of the sentence. They apparently represent the wider company of disciples associated with Jesus, whom He had earlier described as “my brothers” (12:49) or “sons of the kingdom” (13:38). The tax collectors, as representatives of Judaism, were those whom Jesus did not want to “offend.” The word translated “offend” (*skandalizō*) is used several times in the following verses (18:6, 8–9, along with the use of the noun *skandalon* in v. 7) to stress the importance of doing nothing that would be a hindrance to or create an obstacle for another individual in his or her relationship with God.

What Jesus said to Peter was that the disciples should see themselves as free from this stipulation of the law, a prescription of the Old Testament. This may only be a remark made in view of the predicted demise of the temple (24:1–2). But it is difficult to escape the implication that what applies to a particular aspect of the law applies also to all of it. The extrapolation, therefore, is that the ordinances of the Old Testament, although valid for Israel, do not apply to Jesus and His disciples.

47. See Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 192. One of the rights taken away from the Jews under Roman occupation was the mintage of coins, which explains the various references to foreign coins in the Gospels. The one drachma silver coin was the Greek counterpart to the Roman silver denarius. As a rough estimate of value, one or the other might be given as payment for a day's labor (cf. Matt. 20:2).

48. One account of its collection is recorded in Exodus 38:25–26. For a discussion of the history of this tax, see William Horbury, “The Temple Tax,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, ed. Ernst Bammel and Charles Moule (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1984), 265–86.

While that may in fact be a valid induction in theory, the practice which Jesus recommended, at least in this instance, is submission to a precept of the law. This was in order not to offend the Jews, those to whom both Jesus and His disciples were seeking to minister. Matthew's view on the matter may, therefore, be that although the particular ordinances of the law are not matters of obligation for Jesus and His followers, in order to maintain a relationship with Jews and the opportunity for ministry which that affords, the law should be observed. One who chooses not to submit to the law is free to do so ("the sons are exempt") but such a decision will offend the Jews and ultimately lead to the end of opportunities for ministry among them.

Some of the consequences of decisions like this may be seen in what is said about the relationship of different groups in the early church and the Jews. The community of Christians who remained in Jerusalem around James were apparently scrupulous with regard to their observance of the law (Acts 21:18, 20). Less careful on some matters or possibly less guarded in speech about some things was Stephen (Acts 6:13–14). In this respect, however, he is portrayed as speaking and acting in a manner similar to Jesus. Paul, on the other hand, seems to have accepted the fact that he was free from obligation to observe the law, although he willingly undertook its observance on some occasions, apparently to maintain opportunities of ministry to Jews (1 Cor. 9:19–21). This approach was inherently difficult to carry out, and it ultimately got him into trouble with certain Jews in Jerusalem who intended to put a stop to this kind of behavior and thus end his missionary career. They were prevented from achieving this objective only because of Roman intervention (Acts 21:27–32).

Vignettes such as these illustrate why different viewpoints on the role of the law are not easily sorted out. Although there may have been theoretical agreement about freedom from the law generally in the Christian community, there seems to have been significantly different approaches taken when it came to the matter of practical implementation. While Matthew might not have disputed the legitimacy of the approach practiced by Paul, the general orientation of Matthew's gospel seems to be more in accord with the way followed by James.

The retention of references to Jewish practices at various points in the gospel (e.g., temple worship, 5:23–24; almsgiving, 6:2–4; fasting, 6:16–18; temple taxes, 17:24–27; and Sabbath observance, 24:20) and the strong endorsement given to the practice of the law in 5:17–20 suggest that Matthew viewed sympathetically those who chose to live in light of the law and the precepts of Judaism. He, nonetheless, recognized that external observances alone were matters of indifference to God. This is shown by his emphasis on the necessity of having a righteousness that "surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law" (5:20), a recognition that relationship with God is ultimately a matter of the heart which God alone can assess.

THE COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES, THE CHURCH

The mention of righteousness, a significant term in Matthew's gospel, provides a point of transition to the subject of the disciples and the church. Before looking at the ethical or practical meaning of righteousness, however (and the ideas associated with it in Matthew), it would be helpful to consider how Matthew seemed to envision the relationship between the first disciples of Jesus and the church they subsequently composed.

That Matthew saw a correspondence between what he recorded of Jesus' teaching and instruction to the disciples and its relevance to the church is indicated by the gospel's conclusion, where disciples are told to teach others "everything I have commanded you" (28:20). That would seem to be a rather comprehensive endorsement for the applicability of all that Matthew included in his gospel. The fact that it is followed by the affirmation of Jesus' spiritual presence "to the very end of the age" seems to imply, as well, the enduring relevance of this instruction until Jesus' return.

There are some points of difficulty in that view, however, that complicate the facile application of Jesus' teaching to subsequent disciples. For one thing, Matthew had, for the most part, communicated Jesus' teaching in language that is relevant to Jewish religious and cultural practice. To a certain extent that is understandable, since this is the culture in which Jesus carried out His ministry and from which the disciples were drawn.

But what are Gentile Christians to make of injunctions that direct disciples to respond to an unrepentant brother as a "Gentile"⁴⁹ (18:17, although the association with "tax collector" helps make it a label of enduring transcultural relevance)? Or what significance does the command to "put oil on your head" while fasting (6:17) have for a predominantly Gentile church where (at least judging by the silence of the epistles) fasting was not practiced?⁵⁰

Yet these are fairly minor interpretive challenges of the sort the average Gentile would probably handle without too much difficulty. More significantly, what are readers to make of the fact that Jesus endowed His disciples with great authority, not only to "preach" (10:7) but also to "raise the dead" (v. 8)? To what extent did Matthew see these commands, which include the exercise of this miraculous authority, as also applicable to disciples beyond the sphere of the original Twelve?

49. The NIV frequently (though not always; cf. 20:25 "the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them") translates the words *ethnikos* (an adjective) and *ethnos* (a noun) "pagans" as here in 18:17. This is a correct and helpful rendering for modern readers, although the fact remains that the Greek words were simply a reference to Gentiles generally.

50. Space does not permit an extensive discussion of the question of fasting, but it may be instructive to note that apparently Jesus and His disciples did not fast (9:14). Jesus explained this by the fact that mourning (= fasting) was inappropriate while the bridegroom (= Jesus) was present (v. 15). But the gospel closes with the affirmation, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (28:20 NASB). In light of this, the parables of the patch of cloth and the wineskins (9:16-17) which follow the question about fasting (vv. 14-15) may point to the inappropriateness of old covenant practices like this in the era of the new covenant.

What is said about Peter, following his confession of Jesus as the Christ (16:16), may be instructive in answering this question. Following an explanation of the divine enabling behind Peter's ability to make this confession (v. 17), Jesus made two statements about Peter. In a play on Peter's name using the Greek word for rock (*petra*), Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (v. 18).⁵¹

There is little dispute that this last affirmation is meant to be a word of assurance that the church will endure until Jesus returns, even in the face of Satan's opposition. But what does the first part of the statement mean? Was Jesus here declaring that Peter will be the foundation of the early church?

This text (in conjunction with the following verse) has been used by Roman Catholic interpreters to support the view that Peter was the first pope. As a counter to such argumentation, a body of Protestant interpretation has developed which argues that the "rock" to which Jesus referred was not Peter, but rather his confession of Jesus as the Christ. There is nothing inherently improbable about this second proposal, and a good case for this interpretation can be made.

However, the more natural reading of the text is to see that the play of words points to Peter as the rock. But in what sense is he the foundation on which the church is built? The answer to that question requires consideration of the next verse, Jesus' further statement concerning Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (16:19).

The second part of this statement (the binding and loosing) appears again in 18:18 with reference to the disciples generally. This may be an indication that Peter was functioning here as the spokesman or representative of the disciples. If so, he would not be the sole beneficiary of this blessing but would share the role with the other disciples.

Peter, however, was given the keys of heaven. What is the significance of the keys? They open or close doors (cf. Luke 11:52). Matthew gives little indication of how this authority might have been exercised by Peter. The book of Acts, which gives attention to the development of the early church, records Peter's role in proclaiming the gospel to both the Jews and the Gentiles. In that light the role Jesus gave to Peter becomes clear.

51. This statement raises the interesting question of the language(s) spoken by Jesus. Most Jews in Jesus' day spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language kin to Hebrew. There is general agreement that this is the language Jesus, like most Jews, routinely used. However, Hebrew was apparently also known and used in scribal circles (probably the form which came to be known as mishnaic Hebrew), and it is not impossible that when Jesus debated with religious leaders in Jerusalem He also used some Hebrew of this sort in the process. The wordplay on Peter's name, however, is Greek. (His Aramaic name, Cephas, is the equivalent of the Greek, Peter). A knowledge of Greek could also be expected of Galileans who dealt more frequently with Gentiles (cf. 4:15, "Galilee of the Gentiles"), whose common language was Greek. When Jesus spoke with Pilate, for example, He probably did so in Greek (cf. the Epistle to the Romans, written in Greek to a people living in the capital of the Latin-speaking world). See S. Safrai and M. Stern, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 2:1032-37.

Peter preached the gospel to Jews on the day of Pentecost and 3,000 believed (Acts 2). On the birthday of the church, Peter functioned as the first “doorkeeper.” As he declared the gospel, that “in the name of Jesus Christ [you may find] forgiveness of your sins” (2:38), many believed and were baptized. By means of Peter’s ministry, a door was opened to many Jews who by faith in Christ were added to the church.

Peter was also the first doorkeeper for the Gentiles (Acts 10). Invited by Cornelius to come to his house and prepared by God to do so, he went. There Peter preached the gospel, and there also many believed and were brought into the kingdom of heaven. In both cases, it was Peter who initiated this new phase of gospel proclamation and opened the door for Jews and Gentiles.

In this capacity Peter functioned as the rock on which the church was built. He proclaimed the gospel, with the authority inherent in the message given him, and forgiveness of sins to all who believed—to the Jews first, but also to the Gentiles. In that sense, the sins which he proclaimed “loosed” by faith in Christ were loosed. To those who refused to believe, the sins which bound them remained (cf. Acts 2:40). In this way, Peter was the spokesman of God to both Jews and Gentiles, a role to which he was appointed by Jesus Himself.

Was Peter unique in this role? Yes, in the sense that he was the first, but others too proclaimed the gospel. Paul, for example, also preached the gospel. He too opened the door of faith to Jews and Gentiles (e.g., Acts 14:1). The foundation of the church was thus not laid by Peter alone.

In this regard Paul’s words to the Ephesians are relevant, when he described the church as “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20). Peter, indeed, was the first spokesman of the church to preach to Jews and Gentiles, but he was not the last. Nor was his authority unique. Others could proclaim with authority that those who believed the gospel could be assured that their sins were forgiven and could affirm with equal certainty that those who rejected the gospel message did so to their own peril and would remain bound by their sin (cf. Acts 13:38–41). Yet nothing can change the fact that Peter was the first doorkeeper for both Jews and Gentiles into the kingdom. It is this role that Matthew described in these words of Jesus about Peter, who became the pioneer for many who follow in his lead.

Our earlier question still remains. To what extent are the dispositions of authority which Jesus gave to the disciples in the course of their first missionary journey retained by them and transferable to subsequent disciples? The answer is a bit more complex than might first be imagined. As was mentioned earlier in the discussion of chapter 10, concerning the gospel’s message about mission, Matthew (unlike Mark and Luke) provided no report about the disciples’ return from this first journey through Israel, nor is there any account of what they were able to accomplish on it. There is, for example, no report about anyone being raised from the dead. If Matthew’s gospel were all a reader had access to, the question about the extension of authority might remain unanswered. Yet to readers who also have access to Acts, the question of authority is clarified: disciples do retain the authority

Jesus gave them, even to raise the dead. Or at least Peter did, as Dorcas could attest (Acts 9:36–42).

Paul also had that authority, as Eutychus could also certify (Acts 20:7–11). Is, however, Paul, for want of a better description, representative of a second-generation disciple? Apparently not, at least in the way in which he saw his conversion and call to ministry. From Paul's point of view, he was made a disciple by Jesus Himself. No man instructed him (Gal. 1:11–24).

Paul's case, therefore, does not permit a clear answer to be given to the question about the transfer of authority. His own letters suggest that even in his case, however, the authority to do miracles waxed and waned, so that near the end of his life he at one point despaired of saving an ill comrade (Epaphroditus, who nevertheless recovered, Phil. 2:27). And Hebrews 2:3–4 seems to view this kind of authority as a phenomenon characteristic of the first generation or foundational ministry.

The outcome of this discussion, however, does not require alteration of the initial notion that Matthew did see the substance of Jesus' instructions and commands as applicable to the Christian community. In certain respects the first disciples were distinctive, and even among them Peter carried out a special task. But what Jesus said to them has application to subsequent disciples as well, who are to "obey everything I have commanded" (28:20).

This obedience, in fact, is the basic meaning of the term noted at the outset of this section, the word "righteousness."⁵² In the Sermon on the Mount, this word is used with reference to the behavior of disciples (5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33), but it is also used with regard to Jesus (3:15) and John the Baptist (21:32).⁵³ It describes a manner of life lived in accord with God's will. As such, Jesus could tell the reluctant John that baptism was appropriate for Him as well as an expression of His submission to the will of God (3:15).

The first use of the word "righteousness" with reference to disciples is a reminder too that although righteousness, as it is used in the gospel, describes behavior, it is nonetheless an expression of the gracious enablement of God (5:6). A disciple is one who "hungers and thirsts," who earnestly desires to live a righteous life, but the One who satisfies that longing, who makes this righteousness a reality, is God.⁵⁴

52. The adjective "righteous" (*dikaïos*) is relevant here also since it is applied frequently to disciples (e.g., 10:41; 13:43, 49; 25:37, 46) as well as to God (20:4) and Jesus (27:19). Its meaning, however, is like that of the noun, "righteousness."

53. The NASB translation of this verse reads, "John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him." The NIV reads, "John came to show you the way of righteousness," which focuses more on John's message than on his manner of life. Perhaps this latter rendering is correct in view of the following phrase "and you did not believe him." The Old Testament background, however, inclines one to see "way" as a reference to manner of life (cf. Prov. 8:20). In either case, there is no question that John was portrayed with Jesus as one who illustrates a righteousness of life and submission to the will of God.

54. The Beatitudes routinely employ the "divine passive" verb, implying that it is God who will carry out the action referred to (see also nn. 2 and 3). The fact that these are future in tense may also indicate that the complete fulfillment of these desires will not be realized until the consummation of all things (cf. 13:43).

That is why it is also important to keep in mind the antecedent of the pronouns in the well-known statement of 6:33: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness." It is the advance of "His" kingdom, God's rule and reign, which disciples are to seek. And it is "His" righteousness, a manner of life in keeping with God's will, that Jesus sets before disciples as the proper objective of their lives.

Thus disciples are to so live that others may see their good works (5:16) and so that their Father in heaven, not they themselves, will be glorified (cf. 6:9; 15:31). As if to underscore this point, Matthew added what seems to be a contradictory statement a few verses later: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them" (6:1). Besides one's manner of life, its motivation is important to God. Why does a disciple do what he or she does? For self-advancement, personal gain, or glory? It is easy to forget that in the final analysis, it is not the commendation or the admiration of others which is significant, but the approval and praise of God (cf. John 12:43; Rom. 2:28–29). It is this singleness of purpose that Matthew 6:33 holds before disciples.

This emphasis on attitude or motive, the spirit in which obedience is rendered, is also a reminder that however much attention is given in Matthew's gospel to deeds and behavior, there is the recognition that the righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees (5:20) affects the whole person, transforming not just external behavior but also the disposition of the heart as well (5:8). That Jesus referred to a member of the community as "ones who believe in me" (18:6) shows that Matthew had not lost sight of faith as the essential internal characteristic of the true disciple. To believe in Jesus is to accept the fact that He speaks and acts with the authority of God (8:8–10). In the religious leaders' statement to Jesus on the cross, they spoke the truth about Jesus while at the same time revealing their own failure to believe: "He saved others" they said, "he cannot save himself. He's the king of Israel; let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him" (27:42). But because He came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (20:28), He could not come down from the cross. Only hours earlier He had explained the significance of His death to the disciples with the words, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). By failing to believe Him, the religious leaders failed to obtain forgiveness. Faith then is that invisible disposition of the heart whose visible corollary or outward manifestation is righteousness of life.

A good illustration of this interplay between heart and life is found in the way Matthew's gospel calls attention repeatedly to the importance of regard for others, of mercy and compassion, of forgiveness and restoration as a distinguishing mark of one who does God's will. In the Beatitudes, which provide insights into characteristics of a disciple, Jesus referred to blessing for the merciful (5:7) and the peacemakers (v. 9). Being angry with a brother is tantamount to murder, and establishing reconciliation is a matter of the highest priority for a disciple (vv. 21–26). On the other hand, avenging evil or retaliation in kind is not to characterize the behavior of disciples (vv. 38–42; cf. 26:50–52). The enemy, in fact, is to be loved and prayed for (5:43–44).

Nowhere is the emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation more pronounced than in Matthew 18, the so-called Ecclesiological⁵⁵ or Community Discourse. Concern for the well-being of the least member of the community is stressed by Jesus' identification of Himself with a little child (v. 5). Those who for various reasons might naturally invite contempt are to be the object of solicitous concern (v. 10). If one strays from the fellowship of the community, he or she is not to be ignored or dismissed but is to be diligently sought in order to be restored (vv. 12–14). If a brother has sinned, reconciliation must be attempted (v.15). Even if he must be disciplined by the church as a whole, and for the time being denied recognition as a brother in the fellowship, he is still to be loved and prayed for and his repentance sought (some tax collectors and Gentiles became, after all, pillars of the early church!).⁵⁶

The sayings in verses 18–20 also apply to the practice of reconciliation. The church as a whole is to demonstrate the concern of God visibly for spiritual health and vitality in its members by confronting sin and urging the straying ones to seek repentance and restoration. Where such confrontation and discipline lead to repentance, the church as a whole can confidently declare that the individual has been “loosed” from that sin and forgiven, in accord with the will of God, and offered restoration to fellowship as evidence of that fact.

On the other hand, where an unrepentant attitude persists, the church can declare with equal certainty that such a person will reap the consequences of that sin, “bound” by a chain of his or her own making until he seeks the release and forgiveness that God makes available. In this capacity the church functions on behalf of God as His representative, just as Peter did as God's spokesman in a distinct though related capacity in the early days of the church's mission.

So too, just as prayer is to be made on behalf of those outside the church who oppose and oppress it (5:44), it also is to be offered concerning those inside (18:19–20) who by persistence in sin would harm not only themselves but also the community of which they are a part (cf. 1 Cor. 5:6–13). For these as well, the church collectively is to pray, confident that, in God's will, the errant brother will be restored and the forgiveness he needs will be given. In these deliberations concerning the well-being of individuals and the community as a whole, the church is assured of Jesus' abiding concern and spiritual presence (see also Paul's assurance of this, 1 Cor. 5:4). Indeed, to allay any question about forgiveness as a distinguishing characteristic of the church, the discourse concludes with Jesus' conversation with Peter about the extent of forgiveness (18:21–22) and the chilling account about

55. This word is from the word for church or community, *ekklesia*, which is mentioned twice in verse 17 (also 16:18).

56. Perhaps a word about church discipline is in order here. What is denied this unrepentant discipline is recognition as a brother in the fellowship. Tax collectors and pagans were admitted to the gathering of the church (cf. 1 Cor. 14:24–25) if they wished to attend, but it is unlikely that they shared in the observance of the Lord's Supper since, among other things, it was intended to give visible expression to the reality of Christian unity and fellowship. It is not unreasonable to imagine that the same practice would characterize the church's relationship with an unrepentant member until reconciliation was achieved.

the consequences of an unforgiving spirit in the parable of the unmerciful servant (vv. 23–35).

A strain runs through many of these sayings about the necessity of forgiveness that can be a bit unnerving to readers, namely, the recurring references to the consequence of an unforgiving or unmerciful spirit. In the parable of the unmerciful servant, for example, the final scene is of the unforgiving servant being turned over to the jailers until he should repay his impossible debt (v. 34; cf. v. 24), with Jesus intoning these words in conclusion: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (v. 35).

The same basic perspective occurs in the beatitude about the merciful which begins the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown” mercy” (5:7). The implication is that the unmerciful will be shown no mercy by God (cf. James 2:13). This tone of judgment is also present in the exhortation to reconciliation (Matt. 5:21–26). It is implied by the petition in the model prayer (“Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors,” 6:12) and is made explicit in the two verses that immediately follow the prayer: “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (vv. 14–15).

Is Matthew teaching that salvation is by works? No, he knows that salvation comes from the grace of God. The disciples, amazed by Jesus’ statement that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (19:24), asked, “Who then can be saved?” (v. 25) Jesus simply replied, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (v. 26). Salvation is not earned, but neither is it unrelated to deeds. Matthew, in fact, was probably doing several things with these statements about forgiveness. First, he was drawing attention to the importance of forgiveness by making it clear that failure to forgive can have awful consequences. Second, he was stripping away any illusions about what it means to be a disciple. Wanting to be a disciple and being one may be two different things. According to Jesus, a disciple “must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (16:24). In these statements about forgiveness Matthew was giving some direction as to what following Jesus entails.

Third, it is clear Matthew saw the danger of false profession and false discipleship. Some who call Jesus “Lord” will nonetheless be banished from His presence on the day of judgment (7:21–23). Judas is a stark reminder that even one of the original disciples (10:1), an apostle (v. 2), proved false (v. 4). Discipleship is not therefore merely a matter of profession, nor for that matter, is it verified by spectacular deeds of spiritual power (7:22). It is a matter of abiding faith (10:22; 24:10–13), often manifested in simple deeds of mercy (10:40–42; 25:35–40).

Does the God who demands forgiveness of disciples not extend it to them as well? Of course He does. Peter is a classic example. Jesus gave the stern warning to His disciples that “whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge

57. This is another “divine passive” verb (see also nn. 2, 3, and 54).

before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (10:32–33).

Matthew did not often use this word for "disown" (*arneomai*). This particular form of the word occurs only four times: twice in 10:33, and then twice again, when describing Peter's denial of Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest (26:70, 72).⁵⁸ This terrible act seems to illustrate in awful measure the very thing Jesus had earlier warned against.

Is Peter then an example of an apostate disciple, one who will be disowned by Jesus before God? Though this has been contended,⁵⁹ it is an unlikely interpretation. Even if readers had only Matthew's gospel as a source of information about the early church (in itself an improbable eventuality), they would shortly learn of Judas' death (27:3–5) and then see that Matthew mentioned eleven disciples gathered before Jesus on the mountain in Galilee (28:16). One can conclude that Peter was still numbered among Jesus' followers.

A disciple can thus fail in the most abject manner, following an explicit and dire warning, and still experience forgiveness. Peter did. But Judas is a reminder of how close one can be to the kingdom without actually entering into it. And according to Jesus' warning, there will be "many" like him (7:22).

Jesus' words of warning are thus not theoretical or rhetorical. They are meant to clarify the will of God for disciples and to stress the importance of doing that will, as something that is essential, not optional. Jesus did not ignore the question of assurance, as earlier discussion has shown. But He had little time for complacency toward and indifference to doing the will of God in the community of disciples.⁶⁰ The standard is always held out before disciples in Jesus' life and teaching: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). Wholehearted obedience is the desired ideal.

Yet, disciples fail. Even the first disciples had regular lapses of faith. The expression "O you of little faith" functions almost like a nickname for them (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). Matthew's understanding and appreciation of this fact is illustrated in his presentation of Jesus' teaching regarding divorce and remarriage (5:31–32; 19:3–11). Whereas Mark and Luke chose to state only the unqualified ideal (that divorce is prohibited, Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18), Matthew also included a word of recognition that faith may not always triumph, that the "hardness of heart" (cf. 19:8) that existed under the old covenant has not been entirely eliminated in this era of the "now-but-not-yet-consummated" new covenant, and that marriages do fail. What then?

58. Matthew also used the intensive form (*aparneomai*), which has the same basic meaning, in the saying about disciples needing to deny themselves (16:24). It is also used of Jesus' prediction of Peter's disloyalty (26:34), Peter's vow to the contrary (v. 35), and his bitter remembrance of Jesus' words after his betrayal (v. 75).

59. Robert A. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 548–49. (A new edition was published in 1994.)

60. Those who wish to be able to say with Paul that they "have not hesitated to proclaim . . . the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27), would do well to give Matthew's gospel due regard in their preaching and teaching routine.

This is a controversial subject, but Matthew seems to have said that Jesus recognized the right to remarriage for some who have been divorced. It is clear Jesus did not advocate divorce, for He stated the ideal in 19:6, "What God has joined together, let not man separate." In view of all that Matthew has included in his gospel regarding the importance of forgiveness, it should be clear that the first course of action for disciples is always forgiveness and reconciliation. But that is not always an attainable goal. Sometimes the "offending" partner does not seek forgiveness, nor is reconciliation always accepted.

The so-called "exception clause" in Matthew's gospel concerns the issue of "marital unfaithfulness" as a ground of divorce: "anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another commits adultery" (19:9; cf. 5:32). The word *porneia*, translated "marital unfaithfulness," is a general term for sexual immorality. Numerous attempts have been made to avoid the implication of the statement,⁶¹ but the fact remains that the least problematic interpretation is the one that recognizes this for what it is, an exception to the ideal.

Jesus affirmed that there are situations involving marital unfaithfulness where for various reasons divorce occurs. It is a regrettable alternative and one which should be painstakingly avoided whenever possible. But when divorce occurs in such a situation, the exception grants the aggrieved partner the right to remarry.⁶²

Here then is one illustration of a pastoral concern which sets before readers the highest standards—the accomplishment of the will of God—while at the same time recognizing that men and women, still awaiting the culmination of their experience of redemption, do not yet lead perfect lives. It is but one illustration of why forgiveness is essential in the Christian community.

ESCHATOLOGY

It seems appropriate to conclude this summary account of particular aspects of Matthew's message with a discussion of what he wrote about matters related to the close of the age. Attention has already been given to the conviction that Israel will remain a people whom God will not abandon, who will one day welcome Jesus as their Messiah. In the meantime, in this period between Jesus' ascension and His return, what are disciples expected to do and what should they expect to find?

When Jesus spoke about the coming destruction of the temple (24:2), the disciples asked Him, "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (v. 3). His response constitutes the last extended teaching section in Matthew's gospel, commonly referred to as the Eschatological or Olivet⁶³ Discourse (24:4–25:46).

61. For a helpful discussion and evaluation of some alternative interpretations, see Carson, *Matthew*, 413–18.

62. The following verses (19:11–12) discuss the issue of never marrying, not the prospect of remaining single after divorce.

63. According to 24:3, Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the eastern hillside which affords a panoramic view of Jerusalem and the temple area, when the disciples asked Him this question.

It is a curious but instructive phenomenon that, as Matthew recorded it, Jesus' answer to the disciples' questions is rather indirect and unspecific. It may be an indication of the fact that disciples as a matter of course are given what they need to know, not necessarily what they want to know (cf. Deut. 29:29).⁶⁴ At any rate, Jesus told them that He does not know when the time of the end will be: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (24:36).

He did, however, have some instruction and warning for them with regard to how they should conduct their lives in the period that remains until the end. To one degree or another, Jesus' advice and counsel in 24:4–14 is applicable to this intervening period, an era shared by both the disciples then and Matthew's subsequent readers until Jesus' return. Some of it is an echo of instruction also found in the second discourse concerning what disciples can expect to experience in the course of their missionary labors (cf. 10:17–22 and 24:9–14). Otherwise, these words appear to be a general picture of the grim and chaotic conditions that will characterize this period "of birth pains" until the end (cf. Rom. 8:18–25, esp. v. 22). In the midst of these times the gospel must be preached (Matt. 24:14).

Beginning at verse 15 and continuing through verse 25, however, the focus seems to shift to the period immediately preceding the end, just before Jesus' return. These words concern events in and around Jerusalem. In view of the disciples' question, this might be taken as a prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But several factors suggest that an event of greater magnitude is being described here.

For one thing, if Matthew was reporting Jesus' prediction of Jerusalem's destruction in A.D. 70, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he considerably exaggerated the extent of the catastrophe, the reported atrocities notwithstanding.⁶⁵ According to Jesus, "There will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again" (24:21; cf. Dan. 12:1).

Readers of Genesis 6 may wonder how the destruction of Jerusalem can be compared with the catastrophe of the Flood. But this is the sort of comparison envisioned, as the evocation of Noah's milieu at Matthew 24:37–39 shows. Even allowing for some metaphorical exaggeration, the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is not easily squared with the description of events which Matthew portrayed. To see that disaster as a prefigurement or an anticipation of a yet future destruction seems more in keeping with the tone of the passage.⁶⁶

64. That seems to apply in principle to material needs as well (cf. 6:31–33).

65. See the horrific details given in Josephus' account of the tragedy (*The Jewish War*, esp. 5.420–6.212 and the summary 6.429).

66. A problem with seeing Matthew's description as applicable to a period beyond the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is the statement in verse 34, "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things happen." Though this was spoken to Jesus' disciples, it may be that they function as representatives of a future generation of disciples, in line with the understanding that what Jesus said to His disciples also applies to those who follow in their train. It is a difficulty, but similar to the sort encountered in the interpretation of Matthew 10:23 (see the discussion under "Mission" above).

Jesus' citation of Daniel's reference to the "abomination of desolation" (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) also orients the reader to think in terms of last things, since Daniel associated the appearance of this abomination with the time of the end and the resurrection of the righteous (12:2–3, 13). Drawing its name from the phrase used in Matthew 24:21, this period of time is sometimes also referred to as the "great tribulation" (*thlipsis megalē*; cf. Rev. 7:14), variously calculated, based on Daniel 9:27, as lasting from three and one-half to seven years.

At the end of that time ("immediately after the distress of those days," Matt. 24:29), Jesus, the Son of Man, will return. Verses 26–31 concern this event of universal dimensions (v. 30) which will lead to a separation of all humanity (v. 31; cf. vv. 41–42). The reality of this separation, and the judgment that it implies, is the subject explored in various ways in the remainder of the discourse.

In a sense Jesus' answer to the disciples' question about the time of the end posed in verse 3 is answered in verse 42: "keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." Jesus was concerned that during the interim that awaits His return His disciples would be characterized by vigilance, manifested by faithfulness and diligence in carrying out His commands.

In that regard the period of delay that marks this interval until Jesus' return serves also as a part of the winnowing process that will also culminate in the separation of genuine and alleged disciples.

The three parables at the center of this discourse each refer to Jesus' delay and the spirit of lassitude or self-indulgence it may engender in false disciples. In the parable of the servant (24:45–51), the wicked servant said to himself, "My master is staying away a long time," and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards" (vv. 48–49). In the parable of the ten virgins "the bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep" (25:5). According to the parable of the talents, "after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them" (v. 19).

Disciples should not be surprised if Jesus' return seems long overdue. In the purposes of God, "the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of" (24:50). In the meantime, disciples are to "keep watch," because they "do not know what day your Lord will come" (v. 42).

Will there be lapses of devotion and faithfulness in the case of genuine disciples? Yes. All the virgins awaiting the bridegroom's coming fell asleep. In the next chapter Matthew showed readers that despite Jesus' exhortations to vigilance (in this case, in prayer) disciples may fail (the same word, *gregoreō*, "keep watch," used in 24:42–43 and 25:13, is also in 26:38, 40–41). Matthew did not recount the disciples' failure to pray in Gethsemane to provide fodder for excuses, but to show how necessary is divine enablement if frail disciples are to remain faithful, and how hurtful to Jesus their apathy and indifference can be.

The reality of Jesus' abiding presence with His disciples and His identification with them is underscored in the final portion of this discourse, in the account of the judgment of the sheep and the goats (25:31–46). The principle that disciples are

representatives of Jesus (and of God the Father) has been affirmed earlier in the conclusion to the Missionary Discourse, where Jesus told His disciples, "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me" (10:40). This thought is repeated in the Ecclesiological Discourse: "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me" (18:5). So Jesus' words in this final discourse, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine you did for me" (25:40), should occasion no surprise. But it does, not only in the "cursed" (v. 41) but also for the "righteous" (v. 37): "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you something to drink?"

In this way, Matthew reminded his readers of at least two things. First, in the final analysis righteousness is not simply a matter of calculated behavior, even if it is conscious (though in this case the significance of the deed seems either to have been unperceived originally or subsequently forgotten by the "righteous"). Second, Jesus often identifies with those regarded as "the least."⁶⁷

This reversal of values as it relates to people (18:4), status (20:26), and experiences generally (5:4; 16:23), pertains also to what Jesus said about the reward God promises to disciples. What has been mentioned previously about the grace of God in dealing with disciples applies to the subject of reward as well.

Jesus' parable about the workers in the vineyard is flanked on either side by the words, the "first will be last" (19:30) and "the last will be first" (20:16). As Jesus told it, the last ones called to work in the vineyard were given their "reward" (*misthos*) first (20:8), the recompense of a day's labor when all they invested was one hour. Those who labored all day for the same recompense complained (vv. 11–12), understandably, that this hardly seemed fair. But as the landowner pointed out, he had not been unfair⁶⁸ with those who agreed to the usual wage; he simply exercised his right to be generous with others.

Some of the terms in the parable (e.g., *apodidōmi*, *misthos*, v. 8) evoke words and ideas mentioned earlier in the Gospel (*apodidōmi*, 6:4, 6, 18; *misthos* 6:1–2, 5, 16) with reference to the hypocrites who carefully calculate their pretentious "acts of righteousness" (6:1) so they can receive the reward they seek: "to be honored by men" (v. 2 NASB). Jesus' words are meant to be sobering: "They have received their reward in full" (6:2, 5, 16). His words to disciples are in line with this parable: do what is right, without regard to the approval of people or a just recompense. Trust God that His reward will more than exceed the alternatives.

67. Just who "the least" are is uncertain, though the fact that Jesus described them as "the least of these brothers of mine" (v. 40) seems (in light of 12:50, "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother") to identify them simply as followers of Christ. It is possible, however, because of Jesus' instructions about missionary procedure in chapter 10, that itinerant missionaries needing food, clothing (v. 10) and even prison visits (v. 19) are in view. But the emphasis in this gospel on equality among the disciples ("you have only one Master and you are all brothers," 23:8) probably points in the direction of a more general application.

68. The adjective *dikios* (v. 4, "just" or "fair") and the verb *adikeō* (v. 13, "unjust" or "unfair") appear in the parable, possibly as a reminder to disciples that when it comes to reward, as is generally the case in a disciple's life, it is not a matter of justice or fairness but mercy and grace that characterizes relationship with God.

But what is God's reward? In 6:1, Jesus seemed rather indefinite when He spoke of a reward "from your Father in heaven." But the preposition *para* (rendered "from" in 6:1), often indicates simple spatial proximity,⁶⁹ such as when Jesus said, "I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence" (*para tou patras*, John 8:38). The ultimate reward of disciples may well be summed up by the experience of being "in the Father's presence" (*para tō patri*, cf. 6:1). The reward set before disciples thus seems to refer to being in the presence of God (cf. 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God"), an experience every Christian will enjoy (cf. 1 Cor. 4:5, where Paul wrote of the judgment when "each will receive his praise from God").

To what extent later disciples will be participants in Jesus' promise to the Twelve that they will rule and reign with Him (19:28; cf. Rev. 20:6) is not entirely clear. But His promise that "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:29) would seem to indicate that God's reward also includes material aspects, aspects that are readily comprehensible in the context of participation in the millennial rule and reign of Christ as the Son of Man (19:28; cf. Rev. 20:4).

It is difficult to conceive of a greater bliss than the enjoyment of the presence of God. In the final analysis, this is the reward Matthew held out to those who heed the message his gospel bears and who respond to Jesus' call to, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (11:29). For those who do, they are assured of the presence of Jesus "to the very end of the age" (28:20). Beyond that is the assurance of the presence of God, the confidence that "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (13:43).

The disciples' hope is in the person of God—that He will do what He says He will do. The language of "reward" is ultimately the assurance that God will be faithful to His word and will deal graciously with those who are Jesus' disciples.

69. See Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 610.