



# Matthew as Pastor: The Presence of God

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A STORY IS TOLD AROUND HERE OF RALPH KEMPSKI, WHO HAS JUST ANNOUNCED his retirement as Bishop of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod (ELCA). A pastor once wrote to him about some kind of crisis fomenting in the parish, requesting the bishop to “send a theologian over here to help us deal with the matter.” Kempfski wrote back: “I did. You.”

The story may be apocryphal, but the identification of pastors as contextual (resident) theologians is rarely taken so seriously as it was in the long tenure of this exemplary leader’s service to the church. Often that identification is recognized in name only—if that. This became clear to me in tracing the reaction of church and guild to my book on the theology of Matthew’s Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Eschewing such traditional categories as “eschatology” and “salvation history,” I attempted to describe the theology of this book under such rubrics as “Mission,” “Stewardship,” and “Worship.” I considered my book to be a study in biblical theology, but stores often shelved it with the “how-to” practical guides. One reviewer (who

<sup>1</sup>Mark Allan Powell, *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

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*Matthew is not a systematic theologian, but his pastoral response to a congregation in crisis has profound implications for christology, eschatology, and missiology.*

liked the book) wrote, "Powell regards the first evangelist as a pastor instead of as a theologian." No. Not *instead of*.

My thesis is that Matthew's theology developed within the crucible of first-century pastoral ministry and that it can be understood best when it is articulated in terms relevant to such a context. It was at this level that Matthew's theology was most self-aware. I suspect that this evangelist would have felt more comfortable describing his strategy for evangelism than his doctrine of the atonement. I suspect that, on a day-to-day basis, he could have gotten more invested in planning a liturgy than developing a christology. Yet in either of these instances, the former activity may include or imply the latter. Of course Matthew had views about what we would call eschatology and salvation history, but these categories (as such) represent foreign impositions on his conceptual framework. He thought in terms of mission, worship, and discipleship; his theology was pastoral, more practical than theoretical.

I will now illustrate this vision of Matthew as pastor by tracing a single theme in the First Gospel.

#### I. WHERE IS GOD?

The presence of God is a matter of pastoral concern for every age. Where is God? Biblically, this question occurs frequently on the lips of the heathen (Pss 79:10; 115:2; Joel 2:17), but is also expected to be found on the lips of the faithful (Jer 2:6, 8). Where is God? In heaven, of course (see Ps 115:3; Matt 5:34; 23:22), but there is more to it than that. Where do we find God in our world today? Think for a moment of how members of a Christian congregation might answer that question: In the beauty of nature. In the laughter of children. In the kindness of strangers. These are *not* answers Matthew would give.

Matthew's Gospel was written in a time and place when the question of God's presence was especially poignant. Matthew and his readers apparently believed that the world in general and Israel in particular had fallen upon hard times. Indeed, N. T. Wright has recently argued that most Jews in the first century believed that they were still in exile, that God had never returned to dwell in the reconstructed temple.<sup>2</sup> While such passages as Matt 23:21 seem to call the latter assertion into question, the temple had at any rate been destroyed by the time Matthew was written and the promised land overrun by pagan soldiers. So there was paradox: earth may be the footstool of God (5:35), but all the kingdoms of earth were ruled by Satan (4:8-9). The temple may once have been God's dwelling place, but it had become first a den of robbers (21:13) and then a pile of rubble. All Jews had to ask, "Where is God?" and Christian Jews like Matthew prepared a distinctive response: The kingdom of Satan will not stand. His house is being plundered (12:29), for something greater than the temple has come (12:6).

*God is present in Jesus.* Matthew affirms the presence of God in Jesus in a way that goes beyond anything found in his sources (the Gospel of Mark or the Q tradi-

<sup>2</sup>N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), esp. 268-270.

tion). Matthew does not just want to say that God acts through Jesus. For Matthew, the abiding presence of God is tied to the very existence of Jesus. When Jesus is born into this world, Matthew believes that people can say, “God is with us” (1:23). Whatever this means, it seems at least to indicate that God’s presence is manifested in the person of Jesus in a way that is unprecedented: God is now present in a way that God has not been before.

Just how far Matthew is willing to take this becomes evident from the fact that Jesus is repeatedly presented as an object of worship in this gospel. On eight different occasions, Matthew uses the word προσκυνέω to describe people worshipping Jesus, always in contexts that meet with approval (2:11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 21:16; 28:9, 17); by contrast, *God* is worshiped only three times: (9:8; 11:25; 15:31). The word προσκυνέω is used with reference to Jesus only once in Mark (5:6—where it may just refer to an act of extreme respect) and only once in Luke (24:52—which is textually uncertain). Even John’s Gospel uses προσκυνέω with reference to Jesus only once (9:38). Matthew does so eight times.

In Matthew, the word προσκυνέω is not used to describe the attitude that one would show to a human being.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Jesus says (quoting scripture) that people should worship (προσκυνέω) no one except “the Lord God.” According to this declaration, not only is worship of the devil proscribed, but worship of kings, prophets, and messiahs as well. According to Matthew’s theology, Jesus may be King of the Jews, Messiah, Son of Man, or Son of God (as he was for Mark) and still not qualify to receive whatever sort of worship is indicated by the word προσκυνέω. But he does receive it, with Matthew’s approval, eight times. Jesus can receive such worship without violating his own rule about worshipping the Lord God only because, for Matthew, God is present in Jesus to such an extent that worshipping Jesus counts as worshipping the Lord God.

This is an amazing development in the history of Christian theology. We are still many years from Nicea or Chalcedon, but already Matthew is making a pastoral decision that reveals the sort of theology that would ultimately be expressed in the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. I doubt that Matthew has much interest in the development of doctrine as such. His radically monotheistic Christian community has posed a practical, liturgical question: “Is it appropriate to worship Jesus?” He decides that it is, that this does not violate monotheism, but recognizes a definitive locus of the Lord God’s presence. That pastoral decision was profoundly theological, though Matthew locates the presence of God in Jesus on a pragmatic rather than theoretical level. He treats Jesus as effectively divine without attempting to articulate the rationale for doing so. Matthew does not specifically say that “Jesus is God,” but by simultaneously affirming (1) that one should worship only the Lord God and (2) that one may worship Jesus, he comes awfully close.

*Jesus is present in the church.* To say that God is present in Jesus does not yet answer the question of God’s presence in a way that would be satisfying for Matthew’s congregation or for anyone else who lives in an era other than that in which

<sup>3</sup>The “king” in Matthew 18:26 is a parabolic image of God.

Jesus was here on earth. We can almost hear Matthew's congregants responding sardonically, "If only I had been around back when Jesus was here, I could have looked him up and my search for God would have been over!"

Matthew believes that God is *still* present in Jesus, who is still here among his followers. Such an affirmation seems so obvious that we almost take it for granted, assuming that it would be standard for any Christian community. But neither Mark's Gospel nor the Q material contains anything indicating that Jesus will still be present during the time between his physical life on earth and his return.<sup>4</sup> He was once here among us, and someday he will come again. That's it. Indeed, the Gospel of Mark records Jesus as indicating—not once, but twice—that he will not be present with his followers during those intervening years: "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away" (Mark 2:20). "You always have the poor with you...but you will not always have me" (Mark 14:7). Matthew recognizes the literal or physical absence of Jesus also and so his gospel contains versions of these two sayings (9:15; 26:11). But Matthew also adds a number of verses that indicate Jesus will continue to be present in some other sense:

- "whoever welcomes you, welcomes me" (10:40)
- "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (18:20)
- "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (25:20; cf. 25:45)
- "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28:20)

In every case, the locus of Jesus' promised presence is the community of followers elsewhere called "the church" (16:8; 18:17). The only instance in which this identification might be controversial is the Matthew 25 reference, which derives from the famous "sheep and goats" analogy for the final judgment. At a popular level this text is often held to portray Jesus as present among the poor and needy people of the world, but at closer examination it actually portrays him as present among the poor and needy "members of his family."<sup>5</sup>

Locating the presence of Jesus (who manifests the presence of God) in the Church is, again, a bold theological move. Does Matthew mean to establish a certain monopoly for the church as mediator of God's presence on earth? Would Matthew mean to say that God is not found elsewhere—in the Roman temples or the Jewish synagogues? Ultimately, Matthew knows that God is "Lord of heaven and earth" (11:25a), and there are few statements in this gospel that would explicitly limit God's arena of revelation (though 11:25b is one of them). But Matthew does seem to envision a certain "funnel effect" as to where God is most likely to be

<sup>4</sup>An important verse that points in this direction is Mark 9:37, though Markan scholars would generally concede that this evangelist would not have intended these words to be read as promising an actualization or embodiment of Jesus' continuing presence in the church. The seed is there, however, and development can be seen in Matt 10:40 and 18:5.

<sup>5</sup>Most Matthew scholars take the story in 25:31-46 as promising judgment on non-Christians ("the nations") for how they treat Christian missionaries (compare 10:40-42). For a contrary, though in my view unconvincing argument, see Ulrich Luz, "The Final Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46): An Exercise in 'History of Influence' Exegesis," in *Treasures New and Old: Recent Contributions to Matthean Studies*, ed. David R. Bauer and Mark Allan Powell (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996) 271-310.

found: God's presence is most clearly manifest in Jesus, who promises to be present among his followers in the church. Similarly, Luther said that though God is everywhere, God has only promised to meet us where the word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered.

If Matthew's first proposition implied a christology, this second one implies an ecclesiology. I do not see Matthew making any moves to develop a doctrine of the church as such, but his pastoral response to the question of God's promise leads him to a conclusion that has significant ramifications for such a doctrine when it is developed. Indeed, we might take his proposition as an early attempt to define the church. For Matthew, the church is fundamentally "those people with whom God through Jesus has promised to dwell." Specifically, the promises of Christ's presence indicate a definition of church that would be fundamentally practical rather than creedal. Jesus will be present with those people who gather for prayer in his name (18:20) and who go out as missionaries to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom (10:40; 25:20). He will be present with those who baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and who teach people to obey his commandments (28:16-20). He will be present in the church, and in all these instances those people who may be identified as "church" are identified by their activities rather than (fundamentally) by their beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

*The church is present in the world.* What we have proposed thus far may indicate that Matthew would respond to those who are looking for God in this world by telling them to go to the church: if they find the church, they will find Jesus, and when they find Jesus, they will find God. Well, yes, but that's not how Matthew thinks it will happen. The parable of the lost sheep (18:10-14), the great commission (28:16-20), and numerous other texts all indicate that it is God, Jesus, and the church that do the finding. To the person who worries over where God is to be found in this world, Matthew the pastor *might* counsel "Seek and you will find" (7:8; cf. 6:33; 13:44-45). Or, he might just say, "Don't worry. God, through Jesus, through the church, is coming to find you!"

For Matthew it is absolutely essential for the church to be fully present in the world, not divorced from it as some sort of countercultural alternative community that people can join if they desire. In this sense, the most important word in the great commission is the first: "Go!" Matthew does not present the church as a static institution that is willing to baptize people of all nations who happen to come knocking on its doors. Rather, the church is a dynamic movement of people preaching the gospel of the kingdom throughout the world (24:14), aggressively *making* disciples of all nations (28:18). Of the texts listed above locating Jesus' presence in the church, all but 18:20 depict that church as engaged in evangelistic ministry in the world (25:35 and 25:40 depict those who suffer hardships on account of their ministry to "the nations").

Another important text in this regard is 16:18, in which Jesus has been said to offer a veritable "charter" for the church. Of the many things that he might have

<sup>6</sup>Certain beliefs (even creedal ones) are of course assumed. People who fulfill the commission in 28:16-20 must have some notion of what it means to call God "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

said about the church that he would build, the one thing that Jesus does say is, "The gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Some have taken this as implying a promise of protection: if the gates of Hades attack the church, they will not win. This demands an unlikely image, since gates do not usually attack anything. Normally, they *get* attacked. The image for Matthew is one of the church storming the gates of Hades, which must give way before it. The church is on the *offensive* and will overcome the power of death and the devil in this world. This image is parallel to that of Jesus and his followers plundering the devil's house now that this "strong one" has been bound by God (12:28-29).<sup>7</sup>

Reading Matt 16:18 as a promise of protection is unfortunate because protection is the one thing that Jesus does not promise the church in Matthew, except in an ultimate, eschatological sense (10:26-31). Jesus' followers will be handed over to councils, beaten in synagogues, and dragged before governors and kings (10:17-18). They will be tortured and put to death (24:9). They will be betrayed by loved ones and hated by all (10:21-22; 24:9). Protection? Jesus sends them out as sheep in the midst of wolves (10:16), and quite a few should expect to be devoured. They will drink his cup, share his baptism (20:23), and in some instances suffer even worse indignities than he did (10:25).

Still the church goes out into the world and, for Matthew, becomes its salt and its light (5:13-14). For Matthew the mission of the church is to embody the presence of God as manifested through Jesus in a hostile world. This it does by good works (5:16) and by proclamation of the gospel (24:14).

If Matthew's first two propositions implied a christology and an ecclesiology, we see now a theological assessment of the relationship between church and culture. As I understand it, Matthew's view on this subject would best be systematized as a model absent from Niebuhr's classic study.<sup>8</sup> Matthew operates with what I would call a "Christ beneath Culture" paradigm, which (as the name implies) is essentially the model that Niebuhr calls "Christ above Culture" stood on its head. Matthew *is* optimistic about the church's influence in the world, but this influence does not derive from the church's acquisition of power within society but from its repudiation of such power. The church becomes the world's salt and light precisely by remaining powerless.

Again, Matthew does not develop this concept for its own sake or reflect upon it self-consciously. He does not view it at all as a concept to be developed; rather, he attempts to interpret the experience of the church in a manner consistent with what he believes about God's revelation in the world. As a pastor engaged in responding to the critical and practical concerns of everyday people, Matthew is "doing theology." With little interest in the development of dogma or any theoretical formulation, Matthew nevertheless initiates and advances theological propositions.

<sup>7</sup>A different view is put forward by Joel Marcus, "The Gates of Hades and the Keys of the Kingdom (Matt 16:18-19)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988) 443-455. Marcus takes "gates" as a metaphor for demonic agents.

<sup>8</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

## II. MATTHEW'S PASTORAL THEOLOGY

The advent of redaction criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century brought a new awareness of the need to view Matthew and the other evangelists as creative theologians. It has become commonplace for books on the gospels to stress the theology of Matthew or of whichever other book is under inspection. Quite naturally, these studies usually borrow their categories for organizing the evangelists' thoughts from the field of dogmatic or systematic theology. There is nothing necessarily wrong with doing this, but we should recognize the anachronism.

Matthew probably did not think of himself as "a theologian" in the sense that scholars often use that term today. Compare Matt 28:19-20 with 2 Tim 4:2-5. Incredibly, Matthew seems to think people become Christians by being taught to behave in a certain way, as opposed to being taught to believe certain ideas! For Matthew, even false teachers are definitively those whose actions are out of line with God's will—teachers are false not because the content of their teaching is false, but because they do not live the way they ought to live (7:15-23; 23:2-3). Still, as a pastor, Matthew is fundamentally concerned with the quality and integrity of people's lives—both within his community of faith and outside of it. In addressing such concerns, he earns his designation as a theologian. He has no "ivory tower," but he is no less profound a thinker for its absence.

We have examined but one instance in which Matthew's pastoral theology may be seen to work. In responding to the question, "Where is God to be found in this world?" Matthew inevitably wrestles with what we would call christological and ecclesiological arguments, and struggles as well with the question of how matters of faith affect life in the world at large. The practical problem is how God can be present in a world ruled by Satan. The ultimate answer is that God is present through powerless ones whose continual repudiation of worldly power undermines the kingdom of Satan and portends its eventual collapse. The necessary link to affirming that the Lord of heaven and earth is now manifest in such a powerless, oppressed minority is found in the person and work of Jesus. The community of the powerless—the church—is a continuation of Jesus' embodiment of God's presence on earth. To people who are asking where God is to be found, Matthew points to the powerless Christians going out into the world as sheep in the midst of wolves. Welcome them and the message they bring, and you will welcome the one through whom God is with us; indeed, you will welcome the very God who sent him (10:40). ⊕