



Mission and Ministry in Matthew

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THE PERSON WHO REFLECTS ON THE THEME OF MISSION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT—or on the biblical foundations for mission—will typically think of the Gospel of Matthew immediately. The reason is obvious. The Gospel of Matthew closes with the great commission (26:16-20).

At the same time, the person who reflects on the theme of ministry in the New Testament—or on the biblical foundations for church and ministry—will typically think of the Gospel of Matthew as well. Again, the reason is clear. The Gospel of Matthew is a veritable handbook for life together in a Christian community that is nurtured through ministries of preaching, teaching, sacraments, and discipline.

There is a beautiful symmetry of mission and ministry in the first gospel. Both an outreach to the world and a tending of the common life within the church are prominent emphases. Whether that symmetry is taken for granted by the evangelist as the common Christian tradition known to him or whether it is the evangelist's own achievement, it stands as witness against any either/or way of

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For Matthew, mission and ministry are the “meta-marks” of the church. Without them there is no point. Far from being in opposition, mission and service in the name of Jesus fully converge in Matthew’s Gospel.

thinking which calls for mission to the world *or* ministry to the community, not both.

I. MISSION IN MATTHEW

What does the word “mission” mean, and how would one recognize a mission theme in a text? The word “mission” is derived from the Latin term *missio*, a noun related to the verb *mittere*, meaning “to send.” It is not surprising then to find that the Vulgate uses forms of the verb *mittere* in places where the Greek New Testament has one of its verbs for sending (ἀποστέλλω or πέμπω) in obvious mission contexts (Matt 23:34; Luke 10:1; John 17:18; 20:21; Acts 26:17; Rom 10:15). On the other hand, the noun *missio* does not show up in the Vulgate. The Greek term that comes closest to “mission” is ἀποστολή, which is usually translated as “apostleship” (Acts 1:25; Rom 1:5; 2 Cor 9:2; Gal 2:8); the Vulgate translates it as *apostolatus*.

Although one looks in vain for the specific word “mission” in the New Testament,¹ a mission emphasis and mandate is there. Two of the most explicit mandates are in the Gospel of Matthew.

1. The Mission Discourse

The first text is Matt 10:1-42, often called the “mission discourse.” The chapter is located within Jesus’ Galilean ministry and follows a long section in which Jesus has performed a series of miracles (8:1-9:38). As that section comes to a close, Jesus is portrayed as having compassion on the crowds, and he announces to his disciples that “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest that he may send forth (ἐκβάλη; more literally, “propel” or “eject”) workers into his harvest” (9:37-38).

Following this statement, Jesus commissions the twelve. They are to go “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6), and it is among the lost sheep that they are to preach, heal, exorcise, and raise the dead (10:1-16). The twelve can expect both religious and civil persecution (10:17-25); they are to make a fearless confession in spite of that (10:26-33); and they will find divisions among families concerning Jesus (10:34-39). Then come those sayings that connect the mission of Jesus with the mission of the twelve: whoever receives any of the twelve receives Jesus himself. There is more. Whoever receives Jesus receives the one who sent him (10:40-42). Thus the *missio dei* is carried out by the twelve as they preach, heal, exorcise, and raise the dead in the name of Jesus.

One of the perplexities about this mission discourse is that the mission of the twelve is limited explicitly to Jews. Jesus says, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5-6). Why would the mission of God—the God of Israel and the entire world—be limited to so few, based on ethnic and religious considerations? The same viewpoint is expressed in the troublesome reply of Jesus to the Canaanite

¹The RSV has the word “mission” three times for three different Greek words or expressions: Acts 12:25 (for διακονία, usually “service” or “ministry”); 2 Cor 11:12 (as short-hand for “that in which they boast”); Gal 2:8 (ἀποστολή, meaning “apostleship”). The NRSV has retained the term only at Acts 12:25.

woman who seeks an exorcism for her daughter: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). These passages seem to stand in glaring contradiction to the otherwise universal outlook of the Gospel of Matthew (24:14; 28:19; cf. 13:38; 22:9).

The apparent contradiction can be explained fairly easily. The evangelist thinks in terms of two stages—a viewpoint that has a basis in traditions from and about Jesus: (1) during his earthly ministry Jesus' mission was to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; but (2) during his post-resurrection ministry Jesus' mission is to the entire world.

But one should not miss the radicality of the mission of the earthly Jesus. For who are the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" mentioned twice (10:6; 15:24)? Their identity is hinted at just prior to the mission discourse. They are the crowds upon whom Jesus has compassion, those who were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36)—the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

The most likely candidates for such a description are those generally designated as the "people of the land" (*am ha'arez*) in both late biblical and rabbinic literature.² These are the people who did not, or could not, be observant of the commandments of the Torah (both written and oral) to the degree expected by those who set the tone and standard for religious observance of the day, the Pharisees. The "people of the land" were typically regarded by the Pharisees as no better than gentiles, since they did not keep covenant loyalty and solidarity.³

The expressions used by Jesus are rather astounding. To say that the people around him on every side are "harassed" and "like sheep without a shepherd" is to say—in the language of today—that they are persons who have been neglected, even abused, by religious authorities. For Jesus to consider his own mission as directed toward them is to say that he is breaking a current religious taboo, even breaking the covenant loyalty and solidarity upon which the religious authorities insist.

The fact that Jesus' earthly mission embraces those who have been shut out points forward already to the universal mission of the risen Christ. Moreover, his restraint from going to the gentiles—harsh as it may seem—turns out in the final analysis to be a step along the way to that universal mission. In order for a mission to the gentiles to be viable at all, it is necessary for the one sent from God to open doors first for those children of promise who have been excluded. A ministry of inclusion must first tear down the walls of exclusion.

2. The Great Commission

Matt 28:16-20 is justly called the great commission. Not only does it have the explicit words of commission, but it has topographical and geographical symbols to accompany them. The scene is a mountain in Galilee. A mountain is a place of revelation (cf. 5:1; 17:1) where Jesus speaks with divine authority. And in Mat-

²Ezra 9:1-2; 10:2, 11; Neh 10:20-31; mishnaic texts: *Demai* 2.2-3; *Aboth* 2.6; 5.10; *Hagigah* 2.7, and many others.

³A'haron Oppenheimer, "Am Ha-Arez: Second Temple and Mishnah," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1971-72) 2:834-836.

thew's Gospel, Galilee is the doorway to the gentile world. That has been established already at 4:15 (quoting Isa 9:1) where that land is called "Galilee of the Gentiles."

The first words of Jesus in this scene establish his authority (28:18). They recall Dan 7:14, in which a figure like a son of man receives dominion over all; now that is fulfilled in Jesus, the Son of man. The commission articulated by Jesus in 28:19 is commonly thought to consist of four activities: go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. But such a reading misses nuances of syntax in the verse. The verse has one main verb, and that is an aorist imperative in Greek: "make disciples." The other verbs are participles that accompany it. In order to make disciples, the twelve must go forth into the larger world. And the way to make disciples is to baptize and teach. One does not make disciples, then baptize, and then teach. The making of disciples involves a unity of baptizing and teaching those things that Jesus has commanded.

There has been considerable debate over one particular expression in 28:19. That is the phrase πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, which can be translated "all the nations" (or simply "all nations" as in KJV, RSV, NIV, NRSV) or "all the gentiles." If the latter is adopted, it would mean that the disciples would not evangelize Jews. The details of the debate cannot be rehearsed here. Suffice it to say that the latter proposal has generally not met with approval by major interpreters.⁴ The emphasis in a reading of 28:19 should be placed on the *all*, not on the translation possibilities for the Greek term ἔθνη ("nations" or "gentiles"). The verse is inclusive; the barriers among peoples have been broken down—first, the barrier between those who considered themselves to be the "never lost" and those they considered the "lost" of the house of Israel; now, the barrier between "Israel" and the many other "nations" of the world. From the Matthean perspective, Israel is one among many nations in the post-resurrection ministry of Jesus. The mission of God is to all.

II. MINISTRY IN MATTHEW

The mandate of Jesus to make disciples by baptizing and teaching what he has commanded is outwardly directed. But the activities of baptism and catechesis serve to incorporate persons into the church and to bring them to a mature faith. They correspond to their antecedents within Judaism. Incorporation of persons into the people of Israel takes place by means of ritual circumcision and instruction in those things that Moses has commanded. Incorporation into the church takes place by means of baptism and instruction in those things which Jesus has commanded.

The Gospel of Matthew is a handbook for the making and sustaining of a community of disciples of Jesus Christ. It is full of catechetical and liturgical materials for those purposes. The catechetical material is perhaps the most evident. There is the ethical teaching of the sermon on the mount (5:1-7:29), some two

⁴The debate is surveyed and conclusions are drawn in Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew*, Word Biblical Commentary 33 (Dallas: Word, 1993-95) 887; and W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, ICC, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-97) 3:684.

dozen parables, and instructions on community discipline (18:1-35). There are emphases on preserving, protecting, and restoring the vulnerable (18:12-14), forgiving one another in a generous manner (18:21-22), and extending absolution to those who have fallen and are restored (16:19; 18:18; cf. 9:6).

Liturgical materials abound as well.⁵ Twice there are materials within the course of narratives that actually—from a form-critical point of view—have the form of sacramental rubrics. Within the scene of the great commission there is an explicit baptismal formula—trinitarian (or at least triadic), besides—that is to be used in the making of disciples. And within the passion narrative the narration of the last supper has been transformed (over against Mark 14:22-25) to take on rubrics for the celebration of the Lord's supper. While in Mark's Gospel the drinking of the cup is simply narrated (14:23), in Matthew's account there is direct discourse in which Jesus tells his disciples: "Drink of it, all of you" (26:27), making the saying parallel to that concerning the bread: "Take, eat; this is my body" (26:26). A balance is thereby achieved for the liturgical celebration of the Lord's supper, reflecting the sayings of the last supper. Furthermore, the sacramental significance of the meal is spelled out. It makes more sense for the Lord's supper than for the last supper: through the drinking of the cup there is "forgiveness of sins" (a phrase distinctive to Matthew, 26:28).

Other liturgical elements appear as well. Most prominent is the Lord's prayer (6:9-13), which is not simply a model for prayer, but is the dominically authorized prayer of the community. And one of the more fascinating things to observe is that in this gospel there are instances in which requests for the help of Jesus taken from the Gospel of Mark have been transformed into "liturgically correct" phrases in the Gospel of Matthew. Some are expressed in the words of the ancient Kyrie, "Lord have mercy" (see Matt 17:15; 20:30-31 over against Mark's phrases in 9:17-18; 10:47-48). Or the request of the disciples in the stilling of the storm are transformed from Mark's "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" into Matthew's "Lord, save us; we are perishing" (Mark 4:38; Matt 8:25).

The question of who carries out ministry in the perspective of Matthew's Gospel is not clear. Who, for example, is authorized to do baptisms, teach, lead in prayer, and preside at the Lord's supper? The twelve are authorized to do such, but who else after the twelve are no longer on the scene—which would have been the case when the Gospel of Matthew was composed? There are commands against the use of the titles "rabbi," "father," and "master" (23:7-10), which could indicate that some persons had assumed (or tried to assume) such titles. The only legitimate role is that of "servant" or "minister" (διδάκονος, 23:11), and perhaps the term is on the way to becoming a title. According to 23:34, it appears too that there were recognized "prophets, sages, and scribes." The evangelist himself may have been a scribe, if 13:52 applies to him.

⁵This is surveyed more fully in Arland J. Hultgren, "Liturgy and Literature: The Liturgical Factor in Matthew's Literary and Communicative Art," in *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in their Textual and Situational Contexts: Essays in Honor of Lars Hartman*, ed. Tord Fornberg and David Hellholm (Oslo: Scandinavian University, 1995) 659-73.

On the whole, it appears that when the Gospel of Matthew was being written, and in the place where it was written (perhaps in the 80s in the vicinity of Antioch of Syria, as interpreters often suggest), some developments toward church order are taking place, even if there is still considerable fluidity. Clearly the evangelist, who has written a handbook for both mission and ministry, has a leading and authoritative role. It should be obvious that certain individuals—or a group of them—would have had to have the authority (or authorization) to ensure that the teaching, sacramental acts, liturgical usages, and discipline that the book calls for would be carried out in accord with what Christ has commanded.

III. THE CONVERGENCE OF MISSION AND MINISTRY

Mission and ministry converge at several places in the Gospel of Matthew, but nowhere more than in the discourse on the sheep and the goats (25:31-46), in which Jesus declares that those who care for the unfortunates of the world are doing service (or “ministry,” thus the verb *διακονέω* at 25:44) unto him.

Some interpreters suggest that the persons called the “least of these, my brothers and sisters” (25:40, 45) are actually the disciples of Jesus or even a subgroup of disciples, i.e., those who are missionaries.⁶ They do so primarily on the grounds that Jesus calls his disciples “little ones” elsewhere (10:42; 11:11; 18:6, 10, 14). In other words, all the people of the world will be judged on how they have treated the missionaries of Jesus—whether they accept them or turn them away.

For a number of reasons such an interpretation is unpersuasive.⁷ For one thing, it does not account for the surprise of the righteous when they are told that their deeds were done unto Jesus; if they knew they were serving Jesus’ disciples, why would they be surprised? Moreover, the misfortunes of the unfortunates are typical in biblical and Jewish tradition as well as in every other tradition imaginable: hunger, thirst, being an exile, nakedness, sickness, and imprisonment.

The discourse makes a very moving picture. Jesus himself, who suffered in his own life, is to be found in, with, and among the unfortunates of the world. He is hidden among them, but he is there. Doing good to the unfortunates is therefore doing good to him. Some of the unfortunates are far away; some are close at hand.

Reflecting on this passage, one can realize that in our own day mission and ministry are possible on a scale that is wider than ever before. To seek in the name of Jesus to undo the causes of suffering for the unfortunates of the world through political and social engagement is part of what it means to be in mission; to seek in the name of Jesus the alleviation of their misery through direct service is part of what it means to engage in ministry. Ministry in the Gospel of Matthew consists of deeds as well as words; in fact, empty slogans and pious phrases without doing

⁶Comprehensive surveys are found in Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31-46: A History of Interpretation*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 114 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989) 263-264, 358.

⁷Various objections are raised by Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 478-80; Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: John Knox, 1993) 289-91; and W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew*, 3.429-30.

the will of God are condemned outright (7:21). The kingdom belongs to those who produce the fruits of it (21:43).

IV. CONCLUDING COMMENT

The symmetry and the convergence of mission and ministry in Matthew can be instructive. They were clearly important for the church in which the gospel was composed. But the Gospel of Matthew rightly deserves to be called the “ecclesiastical gospel” as long as there is a church of recognizable apostolicity. In these days of the making of “mission statements” by institutions of all kinds, the word “mission” has lost the rich texture of its biblical foundations. Likewise, the word “ministry”—a good New Testament word for “service” in the name of Jesus—is applied to all manner of activities in and outside the church, resulting in a loss of its classic sense. Talk about mission and ministry can therefore become banal.

Yet mission and ministry are the “meta-marks” of the church, those marks that exist beyond the usual marks (oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity), and without which there would be no point in the usual ones. Though by no means the only resource within the New Testament to help us find our way into mission and ministry today, the Gospel of Matthew is indeed an important one. ⊕