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# Matthew: The Shaping of Community

LARRY CHOUINARD

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It has been well said that the test of a story is the sort of person it shapes, and ultimately the sort of community it forms.<sup>1</sup> Matthew's story is the product of a missionary pastor whose interpretation of the primary events of the Jesus story is intended to stir within his readers a renewed sense of identity, and to develop a missional ethos commensurate with their unique social and historical circumstances. He exhibits the concerns of a contextual theologian who retells the story so as to draw his readers into a vision of reality that is often counterintuitive and countercultural. Although the times have changed, reading Matthew in the twenty-first century still captures the imagination of a different way of life that often challenges the values and practices of a broader host culture. In the words of David Bosch, ". . . we are challenged to let Jesus inspire us to prolong the logic of his ministry in an imaginative and creative way amid changed historical conditions."<sup>2</sup> Matthew's story is identity-shaping and still summons the people of God to a mission patterned after God's saving purpose in Jesus.

Essentially, the Gospel is intended to reshape the worldview of its readers by drawing out the implications of the transforming presence of God who has drawn near in the person of Jesus (1.23). We must keep in mind that Matthew's story is addressed to believers who already know the contours of the story. Therefore its message is not primarily *informational* but rather *formational*. It is true, as noted by Warren Carter, that Matthew's Gospel "is an identity-forming, lifestyle-shaping narrative."<sup>3</sup> However, communal formation should not be construed as an end in itself. Like Jesus, kingdom practitioners embody the virtues of another reality; rather than build cultural walls, they merge into the rhythms and everydayness of the broader culture to provide a concrete expression of God's liberating presence. In other words, the church connects to Jesus by embarking on a similar mission that shatters the stained glass sanctuary and takes holiness on the road, redeeming the ordinary and reclaiming all of creation to the glory of God.

Applying these worldview assumptions enables us to navigate between competing worldviews and see the world and its particulars through a different lens. Or, to use Jesus' sensory imagery, we are given "eyes to see" and "ears to hear" (6.22; 11.15; 13.15–16, 34). We do not naturally see; we must be taught to *see* the things of the kingdom and *hear* the voices of those the world seeks to mute by oppressive powers. As noted by Richard Rohr, "When we can see the image of God where we don't want to see the image of God, then we see with eyes not our own."<sup>4</sup>

If Matthew's Gospel were our primary source for shaping ecclesial identity and praxis, what theological

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1. See Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," in *Why Narrative*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock), 158–90.

2. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 34.

3. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 8.

4. Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2003), 56.

foundations and worldview assumptions would shape ecclesial life in the twenty-first century? Though a hypothetical proposal, it has been well argued that Matthew's Gospel was the primary source shaping the ethos of second-century Christianity.<sup>5</sup> It is probably no exaggeration, as noted by R. T. France, "that mainstream Christianity was, from the early second century on, to a great extent Matthean Christianity."<sup>6</sup> Just as Matthew's early readers were encouraged to re-hear the Jesus story in a way that spoke to their self-understanding and sense of purpose, so the twenty-first century church needs to return to its roots to rediscover and reclaim those features that once defined ecclesial life and purpose. No claim is made that the themes isolated in this essay *sufficiently* detail all that is important to ecclesial identity in the twenty-first century, but I am persuaded that these elements provide healthy alternatives and correctives to a modern Western church seemingly overcome by the toxic fumes permeating our dominant culture. Or, to use the horticultural imagery of Phil Kenneson, Christians in the United States of America need "to become more discerning about their host culture . . . For too long we have wrongfully assumed that indigenous plants pose no serious threat to a Christian way of life. As a result, many churches routinely and unwittingly cultivate these indigenous plants, bringing to harvest fruit that bears within it the seeds of some other kingdom."<sup>7</sup> We desperately need a guide to help us navigate the tricky currents of old world thinking and expose its deceptive ideological powers. Matthew speaks into the life of the faith community with a threefold vision: a vision of engagement not withdrawal; a vision of a community informed and shaped by a different story; and an ecclesial expression that looks more like a movement than an institution.

Foundational to Matthew's worldview is the perspective that our earthly realm has been invaded by the presence of a heavenly realm called the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' ministry begins with the announcement, "Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has drawn near" (4.17). With the dawn of a new world order the human response must be a turning from business as usual and a way of life embedded in self-absorption. Its presence demands a rethinking concerning *whom* or *what* has been assigned sovereignty in our lives. Matthew's predominant use of "Kingdom of heaven" as opposed to "Kingdom of God" (thirty-two versus four times), is calculated to highlight the current disconnect between "heaven and earth." As persuasively argued by John Pennington, "Matthew's phrase [Kingdom of heaven] is likely intended to communicate both a spatial sense of God's Kingdom in heaven and from heaven as well as a qualitative sense, that God's Kingdom is heavenly . . . [as opposed to] earthly kingdoms and earthly ways of operating a kingdom."<sup>8</sup> This heavenly kingdom assumes a people whose identity is *heaven-oriented*, who live upon the earth as "salt and light" (5.13–16) with a different set of values and priorities. Being *heaven-oriented* does not reflect a people with their head in the clouds consumed with departing the planet for heavenly bliss. Rather we participate in God's restorative mission to reclaim all of creation by pursuing a reunification of "heaven and earth" under the reign of God. The theological framework and social order envisioned in the reunification of heaven and earth is captured in Jesus' model prayer: "Your will be done on *earth* as it is in *heaven*" (6.10).

But how do you train the faith community to imagine their participatory role in a reality that challenges both sacred traditions (e.g., synagogue) and the theocratic assumptions of the Empire (e.g., Rome)? Apprentices of Jesus must be trained to articulate and embody a preferred future that enables people to dream again: to imagine a community where greatness is defined not by one's elite status or competitive prowess, but by intentionally assuming a position of service that promotes the welfare and good of another (18.2–5; 20.20–28); to embrace a community that assigns value to those pushed to the margins and empowers them to participate (18.6–9; 11.2–6); to participate in a community where the virtues of love, mercy, justice and forgiveness trump ritual performance (5.21–28; 9.11; 23.23) and surpass a minimalist

5. Edourd Massaux, Norman J. Belval and Suzanne Hecht, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus*, New Gospel Studies (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1994).

6. R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 20.

7. Philip Kenneson, *Life on the Vine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 26–27, 29.

8. Jonathan Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 311.

ethical vision based on legal compliance (5.38–42; 12.11–14); and where the love of one’s enemies is sweeter than revenge (5.41–48). Can we imagine our participation in a mission that touches the untouchables on their own turf and exudes a holiness that creates its own sacred space (8.1–4, 28–34; 9.9–13; 11.19; 15.21–39), and where oppression is opposed without mirroring its ways and perpetuating destructive cycles (5.38–42; 26.52–56; 27.27–50)? Can we imagine a community that redefines and relativizes family values in terms of absolute loyalty to Jesus (8.23; 10.37–39; 12.46–50), and challenges a value system where one’s security and identity are defined in terms of the stuff possessed (6.19–34; 8.20; 19.16–26)? Dare we walk in a communal solidarity that challenges imperial claims of sovereignty or questions that the security of the world ultimately depends on the military strength of the Empire? The attempt to dilute the implications of this new world order by straining its vision through our modern stories of the American dream and national interest evidences a lack of a moral imagination foundational to kingdom practitioners. Carter succinctly captures the real world implications when God’s heavenly kingdom encounters earthly affairs: “When God’s empire, God’s saving empire, comes among people, it claims their lives, disturbs the status quo, creates new priorities and identities, gives new purpose, commissions people to new tasks, and creates an alternative community that is going to need formational instruction . . . ”<sup>9</sup>

Matthew reeducates second-generational faith communities by mediating the authoritative teachings of Jesus in story form. In Matthew’s story, Jesus is most widely known as a “teacher” (9.11; 12.38; 17.24; 22.6) who challenges the religious establishment to reread their scriptures—“haven’t you read . . . ” (13.3, 5; 19.4; 21.16; 21.42; 22.31)—and to go and “learn” what it means (9.13; 12.7). Heavy emphasis is placed upon the disciples coming to a level of understanding (13.11–17, 51; 15.10; 16.9, 11; 24.15), as they are trained to be practitioners and teachers of the way of the kingdom (13.51–52). This entails not so much learning new facts as it does acquiring a new way of seeing and hearing (13.10–17). In Matthew’s story, Jesus is the consummate teacher who functions both as an instructor in the way of the kingdom (13.52) and as its core curriculum (11.28–30) in the disciple’s reeducational process—“it is enough for students to be like their teacher” (10.25). In 23.10 the disciples are reminded that they have only one primary “teacher” (*kathēgētēs*). The term translated “teacher” is found only here in the NT and has the nuance of one who “leads,” “guides,” or “shows the way.” Although the term can be translated “teacher” it seems to imply a level of relationship perhaps best captured by the terms “mentor” or personal “tutor.”<sup>10</sup> From the beginning of their association with Jesus the disciples were promised that he would have a creative and transforming impact on their identity (“follow me” in 4.19) and their vocational skills and task (“I will send you out to fish for people” in 4.19). But like anything else in which we pursue competency, the necessary skills of a kingdom practitioner demand a reevaluation of the priorities, securities, and values that grip and shape life’s commitments. His ways are not learned simply by embracing a set of beliefs, but by aligning with Jesus in a life-transforming journey; Jesus’ teachings are intended to affect not just what we believe, but also perceptions, dispositions and even motives. Jesus would transform the total person by bidding his interns to follow him into edgy and diverse learning environments and experiences. This journey is neither for wimps nor the faint of heart. But take heart, he promises his followers, “I am with you always” (28.20). It’s not just knowing the facts of the story that is character forming, but rather sensing the general bent of a narrative that infuses a community with core values and a cohesive worldview. Jesus reinforced kingdom values by embodying the priorities of heaven. Holiness is infused with transformative powers and does not need to be protected or guarded within the walls of a sanctuary (12.6; 21.12–17). Jesus’ cleansing touch brings wholeness and purity and is not contaminated by the process (e.g., 8.1–4, 14–17; 9.1–8). Mission is stimulated by seeing people as the objects of mercy and compassion, not to be avoided but engaged on their own turf (9.36; 14.14–21; 15.29–

9. Warren Carter, “Power and Identities”, in *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World it Imagines*, eds. David Fleer and Dave Bland (St. Louis, MS: Chalice Press, 2007), 12.

10. Bruce Winter, “The Messiah as Tutor: The Meaning of *kathēgētēs* in Matthew 23:10,” *TynBul* 42 (1991): 155–57.

39). Jesus' surprising concept of mission reflects the inclusive nature of kingdom participation by crossing cultural and ethnic boundaries (15.21–38). Tossing aside the traditional nature of “clean and unclean” (15.1–20), Jesus leaves his comfort zone to walk in darkened territory currently under siege by the tyranny of unclean spirits (8.28–34). Fears and unfounded assumptions are washed away in a flood of awe by those witnessing firsthand the cleansing, restorative powers of the kingdom. Surely there is no better way to undermine and shatter the illusions of ethnic and cultural superiority than by hearing one's “enemies” share their common stories of pain and grief while seeing their faith transcend anything present in the homeland (8.10; 15.28)! Thus, in this hands-on, experiential engagement with humanity's brokenness, Jesus models how kingdom practitioners mediate the will of heaven here on earth today (6.10). Unique to Matthew's story is a collection of five discourses (5.1–7.29; 9.35–11.1; 13.1–52; 18.1–35; 24.1–25.46), each concluding with a similar phrase (see 7.28; 11.1; 13.53; 19.1; 26.1). The discourses are embedded in the developing narrative and are explanatory of previous events and set the tone for subsequent scenes. As observed by France, “the teaching is that of Jesus, but the arrangement is that of Matthew.”<sup>11</sup> These discourses provide the framework for awakening the imagination and understanding to a renewed sense of character, ethics, mission, community, political systems and hope. Their overarching message speaks to the life of the faith community and encourages an ecclesial expression radically different in its strategies and community expression.

The first discourse follows the call of the disciples (4.18–22) and a summary detailing the contours of Jesus' messianic activity (4.23–25). He is both proclaiming the good news of the present kingdom and confirming that reality with frequent healings and a direct assault upon the tyranny of evil (4.23–25). Matthew uses identical language in 9.35, thus bracketing scenes illustrative of Jesus' kingdom teaching (5.1–7.29) and his healing restorative powers (8.1–9.34). The summary of 11.4–6 looks back upon the scenes of 4.23–9.34 as a reminder to John concerning the significance of events transpiring. With the dawn of a new world order (4.17), Jesus shares with his disciples a glimpse of what life looks like when God's will is “done on earth as it is in heaven” (6.10). The sermon awakens the moral imagination to an alternative way of life not grounded in the precision of our legal compliance (5.20), but in the very heart and character of the lawgiver (5.48). Real world issues and patterns of behavior are radically challenged with a creative moral intuition and instinct shaped by different values and priorities (5.20–48; 6.1–34). The life of the community revolves around the sentiment of The Lord's Prayer that envisions the tensions between the “heavens and the earth” ultimately being resolved in the indomitable presence of the king mediating God's authoritative will upon the earth (6.10). Until then, we are called to pursue the way of the kingdom and its justice (6.33) by conforming our will and life to the priorities of a kingdom not of this world. The first discourse shapes community by affirming shared values that are foundational to the character and purpose of those called to become a blessing in the world (cf. Gen.12.14). The message exudes an intuitive awareness of the heart of God and is spoken with such authoritative insight that even the overhearing crowds are blown away by the implications (Matt 7.28–29).

The second discourse reflects a pattern that moves naturally from *identity* to *mission* (9.36—11.1; cf. 5.3–16). The disciples, like their Teacher, are compelled to decisive action; being first moved by “compassion” (9.36–38), they are to embark upon a mission modeled after Jesus' liberating mission to transform the human condition by announcing the good news of God's in-breaking kingdom, and exhibiting its presence by bringing wholeness out of brokenness and liberating those in the tyrannical grip of evil (10.5–7). Although Jesus' mission often crosses cultural and ethnic boundaries (8.5–13, 28–34; 15.21–39), covenantal faithfulness gives initial priority to Israel to hear and see the wonders of God's redemptive plan (10.5; 15.24–26). The missional plot of the biblical story has always been from the “particular to the universal,” from the “one to the many.” As noted by Bauckham, the movement of the narrative “runs from

11. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 160.

the old to the new [cf. 9:14–17] constantly reconstructing the past in memory and constructing the future in expectation . . . [The] mission is a movement that is always being joined by others, the movement, therefore of an ever-new people.”<sup>12</sup> The interns of the kingdom are taught missions by being sent into diverse cultural settings, where “real life” happens. In this context they learn to exercise trust in God’s providential care and wisdom (10.9–15, 19–20, 26–31), to respond creatively to rejection and hostilities (10.16–18, 23–24, 38–39), and to fully experience the depth of true community and family (10.11–14, 32–33, 40–42).

After identifying the messianic family as those “who do the will of God” (12.46–50), in the third discourse (13.1–52) Jesus shares with his new family the secrets of the way of the kingdom. A series of seven parables captures in story form how God’s transforming presence seeps into the cracks of human experience and makes its presence known. They answer the following questions: Why is the majority largely unresponsive or dismissive of the way of the kingdom (13.1–9, 18–23)? Why does the kingdom coexist with evil and seemingly tolerate its presence (13.24–30, 36–43, 47–50)? Why does the arrival of the kingdom lack the expected “shock and awe,” and appear so inconspicuous (13.31–33)? Though the kingdom progresses without coercion and is not characterized by the political power structures of the Empires, as in Daniel’s vision (2.29–45; 7.13–14), it will ultimately prevail. But the seed of the kingdom grows at its own pace, and its growth patterns resist our fetish for control and manipulation.

Jesus’ fourth discourse is occasioned by an internal squabble among the disciples concerning, “who is greatest in the Kingdom of heaven” (18.1). Their question assumes that the kingdom community operates with the same standards of honor and status typical of the broader culture. Jesus proceeds to turn their old-world thinking upside-down with a vision of a countercultural community. The character of this community is best seen in how they treat the least among them (18.2–9). In this community the value of the *one* who goes astray initiates a rescue mission patterned after God’s own heart (18.10–14; cf. 9.36f.). Communal accountability is taken seriously when conflict threatens the *shalom* of community life (18.15–20). The communal task is to discern and embody a way of life that values and models reconciliation and forgiveness (18.21–22, 23–35). Since these core values go to the heart of the kingdom community, a failure to value and seek restored relationships is an exhibition of old-world thinking, not one shaped by Jesus’ merciful presence (18.20). It is clear that Matthew envisions a merciful and inclusive community that provides a glimpse of how kingdom realities counter old-world thinking about doing life together. In this community we learn the art of forgiveness, reconciliation and mutual sustenance on a path traveled by few.

The fifth discourse (24.1–25.46) naturally follows Jesus’ stinging denunciation of Israel’s corrupt leadership (23.1–39), by detailing the inevitable collapse of a system fueled by national pride (24.1–35). While the kingdoms of the earth square off for dominance (24.7), kingdom practitioners continue to announce the good news of an alternative kingdom countering the ways of this world’s empires (24.14). Participants in a kingdom not of this world have no stake in the clash of the empires and are obliged neither to defend their systems (24.15–21) nor to assign messianic status to any political figure (24.23–28). Instead they are to continue in faithful service (24.42–44, 45–51), living a life of discernment (25.1–13) by investing time and energies in *heavenly* realities (25.14–30). The discourse concludes (25.31–46) with a programmatic vision of how the kingdom community models an alternative mission in a world filled with oppression, violence, economic injustice and social inequities. The kingdom community models a new world order by learning to see the face of Jesus in those least esteemed by the broader culture. Remarkably, those whom the world dismisses as marginal at best, Jesus embraces as his “brothers and sisters” (25.40). In the faith community we learn a new way “to see,” and through repeated practice our instincts to withdraw are replaced by a compassion compelling us to draw near.

It is hard to imagine a better discipleship manual for cultivating depth of character and a vision for mission than Matthew’s Gospel. According to Bosch, Matthew’s primer for following Jesus involves, “from

12. Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 13–15.

the beginning and as a matter of course, making new believers sensitive to the needs of others, opening their eyes and hearts to recognize injustice, suffering, oppression, and the plight of those fallen by the wayside.”<sup>13</sup> Is it any wonder that Jesus’ final words in Matthew’s story—“teaching them to observe all that I have taught you” (28.20)—call for a discipleship deeply rooted in a way of life envisioned by Jesus’ teaching? With Jesus as teacher and “living curriculum,” churches become kingdom outposts modeling what it looks like when heaven’s will begins to redeem all creation to the glory of its Creator.

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13. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 81.