

Global discipleship - making disciples for the sake of the nations

A study of the Gospel according to Matthew

Introduction - Matthew's handbook for the church

Why did Matthew write his gospel? John clearly had an evangelistic aim (Jn 20:31), but Matthew wrote his gospel for the church, for those who already follow Jesus. It is a teaching gospel, which arranges its material into subjects, summarising the teaching of Jesus and illustrating it with examples from his life. Matthew's is the only gospel that mentions the church (16:18; 18:17). In short, Matthew wrote the first discipleship training course!

Matthew divides his material into 5 sections, each of which contains a number of stories from the life of Jesus, and concludes with a chapter (or two or three) of extended teaching by Jesus to his disciples, before finishing with the passion narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This five-fold division was no accident, for Matthew was a Jewish Christian (and former tax-collector), and all Jewish writings of his time followed this pattern (based on the 5 books of Torah - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).

Why did Matthew write this gospel for the church? He probably wrote it at a time when church and synagogue were growing apart, when the distinction between Jew and Christian was becoming more obvious. At first, most if not all followers of Jesus were Jewish. But over time, as more and more Gentiles found new life in Jesus, an 'either/or' situation developed. Matthew's church was probably made up of Jewish Christians, facing increasing pressure over their (apparently) divided loyalties. And he wanted to show them that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah, fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures, and that they were not being unfaithful to their roots by being Christians.

So how is this relevant to us? Matthew's church has been described as "a community cut off from its roots.....divided in itself as to what its priorities should be, groping for direction in the face of previously-unknown problems" (David Bosch, 'Transforming Mission', p58). Does this sound familiar, such as our own context today? And Matthew's response? "His concern is not simply to help his people cope with the new pressures they confront, but to assist them in developing a missionary ethos that will match the challenges of a new epoch" (Bosch, *ibid*).

Matthew's aim is therefore both pastoral and missionary – pastoral, in wishing to convey self-confidence to a community of Christians facing a crisis of identity; and missionary, in seeking to embolden them toward seeing opportunities for witness and service around them.

So this is very relevant to us. Matthew has written a gospel for the church, for those who follow Jesus, to encourage and motivate them, to give them confidence about who they are, and to direct them outwards, to share the good news with others.

Matthew's understanding of mission - making disciples

The theme of discipleship is central to Matthew's gospel, and the term 'disciple' is used far more often by him than by Mark or Luke (Mt 73, Mk 46, Lk 37 times). But while in Mark and Luke, 'disciple' is the term reserved only for the Twelve, in Matthew it is used more widely, of any follower of Jesus. The Twelve are the prototypes for all disciples, who are to copy them, doing the things they did. And as well as being linked to the first band of disciples, any contemporary disciples are also linked to each other. No disciple can follow Jesus alone, but is irrevocably linked to the fellowship of disciples, the *ekklesia*, the church (which, as above, is why Matthew mentions it).

There is a strong emphasis in Matthew's gospel on doing God's will, keeping his commands, and the challenge to be perfect, to surpass or excel, to observe or keep, to teach, and to bear fruit. Consider for example the concern for *doing* God's will. In the Lord's Prayer, we are to pray that His will be *done* (6:10); only those who *do* the will of the Father will be saved (7:21-23); in the parable of the two sons, it is the one who *did* his father's will who is commended, not the one who said he would (21:28-31). For Matthew, actions are the test of the authenticity of words. It is not what we say, but what we do, that matters. Orthodoxy is not as important as orthopraxis - right action surpasses right belief. Discipleship is about doing, about service.

Another concern for Matthew is that any disciple of Jesus should give evidence of *dikaiosyne*, that is, justice-righteousness. It is a difficult word to translate into English, since it carries the connotations of both these words. 'Righteousness' refers to a right relationship with God; 'justice' refers to a right relationship with our fellow human-beings. It is neither only spiritual, nor only pragmatic. A right relationship with God protects us from legalism, and a right relationship with others protects us from empty words (both mortal sins in Matthew's eyes). Discipleship includes a concern for both justice and righteousness.

Who is to be disciplined?

This is the most Jewish of the gospels, full of direct Old Testament quotations and allusions. On two occasions, Jesus appears to restrict the work of himself and his disciples only to Israel (10:5-6; 15:24).

And yet Matthew still manages to conclude his gospel with one of his most famous passages, the 'Great Commission', sending his disciples to make more disciples, of all the nations (28:18-20). Is this a bit of a surprise to the disciples, an afterthought by the soon-departing Jesus? As if he were saying, "Oh, by the way, here's something I should have mentioned earlier, but I forgot. If you feel like it, and are not too busy, could you disciple a few nations for me?".

But the 'nations' (Gentiles, *ethne*) are in fact never far from sight throughout Matthew's gospel. They are included in Jesus' genealogy (1:5); they are the first to worship the new-born Christ (magi 2:1-11); Jesus lived in Galilee 'of the Gentiles' (4:15); news of his activities 'spread all over Syria' (4:24); the 'plentiful harvest' of 9:37 alludes to a wider perspective; the quotation of Isa 42:1-4 in 12:18-21 mentions 'the nations' twice; in the parable of the wheat and the tares, the field is 'the world' (13:38); Jesus was willing to enter non-Jewish homes (8:7); Jesus commends the faith of Gentiles, including the Canaanite woman whom he apparently initially rejects (8:10; 15:28); he explicitly promises that many from 'the nations' will participate in the messianic feast (8:11), and that finally the gospel will be preached in the whole world, as a testimony to 'all nations' (24:14).

Thus, for Matthew, the mission of the church is to make disciples, followers of Jesus, who will *do* the Father's will, from every nation. Discipleship is self-reproducing. Disciples will make disciples, who will in turn do the same, into every nation on earth.

The 'Great Commission' - Matthew's summary of what disciple-making means

When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the names of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:17-29).

These are some of the most used (and abused?) verses in recent Christian history. Often taken out of context, and used to support missionary appeals of all kinds, this ignores the context we have outlined so far. They are not, as I suggested above, an afterthought, but rather the climax, a culmination of everything said up to this point, a summary of Matthew's entire gospel, written so that we might "make disciples of all nations".

For Matthew, discipleship is the mission of the church, with all the nations in view. The content of this discipling is teaching and baptising. The 'going' is not an imperative in Greek but a present participle - thus it is not a command, but an assumption. The overall aim of the church, and therefore of all discipleship, is the winning of all nations to the status of true followers of Jesus.

So how does Matthew suggest this is to be done? Mark uses 'proclaim' (*kerysso*) and 'teach' (*didasko*) interchangeably. Matthew never does. Jesus never 'preaches' to his disciples. He teaches them. In the first commissioning, the disciples are sent to 'preach' (10:7), a 'proper' missionary activity. But in the Great Commission, this is not so. The disciples are sent to 'teach', an activity reserved for the benefit of disciples, those who already follow Jesus.

To understand this, we need to remember that, for Matthew, teaching is no mere intellectual enterprise. Jesus' teaching appeals not to the mind, but to the will. It is a call for a concrete decision to follow him, and to submit to God's will (as revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus). Proper

actions, not words, are what count. This is what it will mean to disciple the nations. It is not enough simply to proclaim that 'Jesus is Lord' - people from every nation are to be turned into mature, active followers of him.

Jesus has universal authority. Why then make disciples? Because this fact has to be proclaimed to all. If Jesus really is Lord, it simply has to be proclaimed. No-one who knows can keep silent about it. They can only do one thing - help others to acknowledge Jesus' lordship. Only Jesus' authority inaugurates and makes possible a worldwide mission. The universal, unlimited dominion of the risen Jesus evokes an equally universal, limitless response from his followers.

Jesus promises to be with the disciples always, to the end of the age (Matt 28:20), is rooted in the first title given to him - Immanuel, God with us (1:23). This presence is permanent, FACT, based on nothing more spectacular than a simple promise. No fireworks, no Pentecost.

This presence and empowering is not simply for our own comfort, but is intimately connected with mission. It is only as it makes disciples that the church knows the presence of Jesus.

The disciples are clearly modelled on Jesus, to do the things that he did ("teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"; cf 10:24-25). But the disciples are not expected to be perfect. They are referred to as being 'of little faith', 'afraid', or 'full of doubt'. Even in Matt 28:17, all worship, but some doubt. This communicates that mission never takes place in self-confidence, but in the knowledge of our own weakness, at the point of crisis where danger and opportunity come together. Like the first disciples, we stand in the place of tension between worship and doubt, faith and fear. Mission is "not a fringe activity of a strongly-established church, a pious cause which may be attended to once the home fires are first brightly burning" (David Bosch) it is not one of the things the church does. It is the framework for all that the church does and is. It is the reason, the goal, the end of discipleship.

© Richard Tiplady
December 1996