

MATTHEW'S GOSPEL AS A DISCIPLESHIP MANUAL

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It is always valuable to work out an author's intention in writing, and Bible writers often make their purpose clear. Matthew brings his Gospel to a climax by describing how the risen Lord Jesus unveiled what it really meant to be 'Son of Man'—enjoying the universal authority of the one who approached the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7: 14). As Jesus identifies with our humanity as a 'son of man', it is shown to have concealed depths. So, the King of the Kingdom of Heaven delivers his great commission:

*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and **make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name 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"¹.*

1 Matthew 28: 18–20 (NIV), emphasis added.

Rightly, this is taken as a missionary mandate. But the main verb is not 'go', but rather 'make disciples'. Christian mission is about what you are to do wherever you go: make disciples of all nations. But how do we do that? I suggest that is precisely why Matthew has written his Gospel and the 'Great Commission' is one of the keys which unlocks its treasures². Matthew's Gospel connects promises to the Patriarchs to the Messianic promises made to David, and in turn connects the Messianic promises to Jesus. But he does that in the context of Jesus' making disciples and then engaging them in the ongoing task of disciple-making. Jesus doesn't just tell them to do that, though. Matthew spells out how Jesus intends us to do it and gives us the tools for the job that he has received from the Master himself—who, having conquered death, commits himself to be with his disciples in the task to the ends of the earth until the end of the age.

AN EXAMPLE OF 'MAKING DISCIPLES'

Jesus is the ultimate disciple-maker. In common with Mark and Luke, Matthew tells the story of Jesus' interactions with the crowds, but also with his band of followers— his 'disciples', to whose questions he responds with more teaching than he has offered more generally. Indeed, the disciples are often the primary audience, with the crowds in the background, perhaps listening in³. Having been called, the disciples 'followed' him⁴—much as a group of students or junior doctors follow a consultant on ward rounds. Jesus takes them with him through all the experiences of life⁵, teaching as he goes, showing them how to minister to people in need, sending them out on training missions⁶,

1 Matthew 28: 18–20 (NIV), emphasis added

2 Matthew 13: 52 is another such key at the heart of the Gospel, as is Matthew's opening verse.

3 See Matthew 5: 1–2.

4 Matthew 4: 18–22; 9: 9.

5 E.g. Matthew 4: 23–25; 8: 1–9: 38

6 Matthew 10

and then continuing their instruction in light of questions raised by others—whether the disciples of a disillusioned John the Baptist⁷ or the Pharisees and other religious authorities⁸.

DISCIPLESHIP COURSE CONTENT

Uniquely, Matthew provides us with five major examples of Jesus' teaching. Whether delivered as a single address or whether Matthew selects an occasion around which he gathers teaching that Jesus might have given on a number of occasions (it is not uncommon for itinerant preachers to re-work and recycle their sermons!), Matthew provides us with five 'blocks of talk' from Jesus. Each ending with the formula, 'And it came about when Jesus had finished saying these things,'⁹ they are clearly defined discourses, containing what Jesus considered to be core curriculum for his followers. Churches and training institutions could do a lot worse than to re-model their teaching programmes around Jesus' priority teaching:

- a) The character and behaviour of a follower of Jesus (Matthew 5-7)¹⁰
- b) Instructions for mission (Matthew 10)¹¹
- c) Teaching that provokes questions, thinking, wisdom (Matthew 13)
- d) Living as a community of disciples (Matthew 18)
- e) Living in hope in the light of fulfilled prophecy (Matthew 24-25)

BROAD AS THE BIBLE, FOCUSED ON JESUS

Matthew is noted for his 'fulfilment sayings', which undoubtedly at first puzzle the thoughtful reader. Again following a clear formula, Matthew points to various events in the life of Jesus as fulfilling the scriptures¹². However, when we look them up, we discover that these 'fulfilments' are not in nature 'predictions come true'. If we were to value them for their apologetic content, we would probably be laughed out of court as, in their original context (if the context can even be determined¹³), they do not obviously mean what Matthew declares to have been fulfilled! But the Old Testament context is clearly significant for Matthew. What he seems to do is make a thought connection between an event in Jesus' life and some Old Testament saying. When that saying is explored in its original context, it then illuminates the significance of what Jesus did. So Jesus' triumphal entry¹⁴ is explained by reference to Zechariah 9—which in turn enables us to make sense of Zechariah as a whole. But the fulfilment formula sayings are only one way in which Matthew links the events of Jesus' life to the Old Testament, thus inviting us to look up quotations and allusions in their original context and

7 Matthew 11

8 Matthew 12

9 Or similar: 7: 28; 11: 1 (giving instructions); 13: 53 (these parables); 19: 1; 26: 1 (all these things).

10 NB, the climax about doing what Jesus says, not just knowing it. Jesus leaves no room for theoretical theology; his teaching must be practised.

11 Jesus doesn't wait till the end of the course before sending his disciples out.

12 Matthew 1: 22-23; 2: 15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16; 8: 17; 12: 17-21; 13: 35; 21: 4-5; 27: 9-10.

13 2: 23 seems intentionally vague.

14 Matthew 21: 1-11

so learn more about Jesus¹⁵. Rather than being somewhat idiosyncratic (part of Matthew's 'Jewishness'?), his Christ-centred way of reading the scriptures—making connections that cause us to ask questions leading us to discover how Jesus 'fills full' the Old Testament text—is something that Matthew seems to have learned from Jesus himself¹⁶. In other words, Matthew teaches us how Jesus intends that we should read and interpret the Bible, and gives us a wonderful selection of worked examples to get us started!

HOW MIGHT WE TAKE A LEAF OUT OF MATTHEW'S BOOK?

First and foremost, I believe that we need to be intentional about making disciples of all nations. **World mission** is part of the essential agenda for all followers of Jesus. It cannot be left as a niche interest for a few keenies. In the UK, we have the great advantage that the nations have come to us. So, many of us can play our part in obedience to Jesus without even leaving these shores. But we still have a part to play in sending missionaries and, indeed, in receiving gospel workers from other parts of the world whom God is sending here. Rather than assimilating them into 'British church life' so that they teach the Bible in a way that suits a UK congregation, we can learn together with them how to read the Bible the Jesus way and communicate the Jesus of the Bible to our multicultural society. In other words, we can be fellow learners; fellow-disciples who make disciples.

We are not left to our own devices about how to do this. We can learn from **Jesus' method** as well as from his core teaching priorities. Public proclamation is not something to be restricted to the four walls of church buildings. Jesus both went out and sent out. But even preaching in churches (comparable with Jesus' 'teaching in their synagogues'¹⁷) cannot be done in isolation. Jesus' mercy ministry must also be our model. He cared about people out there¹⁸. And while he may have delivered 'set piece' sermons, much of his teaching was interactive and in response to questions. Not least is this true when teaching his disciples, who stand out from the crowds by coming and asking questions¹⁹. Jesus' parables both concealed and revealed—but revelation came to those whose ears, eyes and hearts were opened to ask. While not neglecting the crowds (even the crowds who come to church), should we perhaps be focusing our energies on the disciples who come and ask questions? Nowhere is this more important than in our emphasis within small groups. In many churches, home groups are used as a means of pastoral care—perhaps fellowship-based, praying for one another, sharing insights from God's word, perhaps in response to questions raised by a Bible study guide. All good stuff, but I wonder if we started with Jesus' approach to disciple-making whether we might be more effective. If we were starting from scratch as Jesus-followers, might we not set times when those who wanted could come to quiz the preacher about what he had said and ask the hard questions about how the Bible's teaching makes sense of the issues of the day?²⁰ Having trained a bunch of people how to do this (i.e. having made disciples!), they could then carry on making disciples (who will, of course, pray for one another, teach one another from the Bible and encourage one another to shine as lights in the community, at home and at work).

15 E.g., Matthew 21: 9-16

16 Matthew records three occasions where Jesus speaks of how he fulfils scripture: 5: 17; 13: 14; 26: 54-56.

17 Matthew 4: 23; 9: 35

18 Matthew 9: 36

19 Matthew 13: 10-17

20 Indeed, shouldn't any teaching meeting have a Q & A time?

DISCIPLE-MAKERS DO NEED TO BE TRAINED

Disciple-makers need first to become disciples. Colleges can help in this, though some colleges seem to reproduce Christian academics rather than grass-roots disciples. (We do need trained Bible scholars; but we need many more missionary disciple-makers!) The main training ground, however, is the local church. So, rather than sending people away to be trained, why not bring in trainers to complement the home team?²¹ Viewing the church as a training camp might be one of the most significant shifts we can make in our thinking in the light of Matthew's Gospel. Church is less about running 'services' than equipping God's people for service.²² We have no commission to have weekly times of 'worship'²³—and the things that seem to trouble us (contemporary or traditional music, for example) are biblically irrelevant²⁴. Matthew's Jesus starts with thought-through Christian character and lifestyle; he sends his disciples out on hands-on mission; he gets them thinking and asking questions; he teaches them how to live in community—expecting them (and succeeding generations of followers) *to do what he says*; and he shows us how to think about the times we live in by showing how Jesus is not only the fulfilment of scripture but the ultimate prophet²⁵ who has been proved true in the events of history within a generation²⁶.

Of course, Jesus' followers will be worshippers. But true worship comes not from a focus on 'worship', but through a constant focus on Jesus, specifically the Jesus of the Bible. The Gospels each have a part to play—and my own practice in pastoral ministry was to have a different Gospel running each year (at least in the background, whatever other Bible books we were studying), to keep a sharp focus on Jesus. Luke and John in particular also help us to connect the Jesus of the Gospels to the rest of scripture. But in my view, Matthew does this *par excellence*. Those who learn to be disciples with Matthew's manual always to hand will find Jesus revealed all the way through the scriptures. And they will find their awe and wonder constantly renewed, giving us not only a message to preach, but, inspiration to worship as scribes trained in the kingdom bring out of their storehouse treasures old and new²⁷.

21 Mark Davies, Training Director of GLO, has recently moved to London to spearhead local delivery of training through independent churches. Partnership's MASTERclasses are part of a suite of training opportunities on offer through the National Training Network (website <http://www.nable.info>).

22 Christ's purpose in providing word ministries so that his body will be built up to maturity (Ephesians 4: 11-13).

23 Worship is a 'whole life' activity, so of course worship (and singing the praises of God) should be a major focus of our 'training sessions' for the rest of life.

24 They can, of course, become an opportunity to learn to accept and value one another's differences (see Romans 14: 1-15: 7)—and so help make us disciples.

25 Acts 3: 22 citing Deuteronomy 18: 15.

26 The destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 which is the primary focus of Matthew 24: 1-34 answers the first part of the disciples' question in 24: 3. After the pivot verse 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away', Jesus teaches the need for constant readiness for his end of the age coming—as it will have no sign (despite the second leg of the disciples' question). See 24: 36–25: 46.

27 Matthew 13: 52