

God With Us in Power: Preaching Matthew Missionally

Stanley P. Saunders

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

In the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple at the hands of the Romans in 70 C.E., members of Christian households—like other groups among the people of Israel—faced the task of defining anew their identity and vocation in the absence of what had been defining cultural and religious symbols. Even for Gentile members of the Christian community, the loss of temple and holy city, which had remained the focus of eschatological hope among both Jews and Christians, posed a staggering and foundational challenge. How, under the domination of a worldly power proclaiming itself the embodiment of “peace” and “salvation”—but bent on violence and destruction—could fresh vision and sustaining hope be nurtured? How, moreover, was the Christian community to articulate its identity vis-à-vis the other groups around them, whether pagan or Jewish, as all of them came to terms with Roman imperial power?

By comparison, the sense of disenfranchisement, lost identity, and diminished power that is beginning to settle in among many North American denominations today appears to have roots in a much smaller and more local crisis. Indeed, in other parts of the world, and even among other Christian groups within our own hemisphere, the sense of God’s presence and power and the vision of God’s dawning reign remain vibrant and clear. Nonetheless, our sense of loss and attendant grief is no less real for having been caused by erosion rather than the flash of military fire. We have sufficient reason, then, to turn to the Gospels—documents written in the face of crisis still more acute than our own—as models for establishing Christian vision and vocation in the midst of crisis.

At the most general level, the evangelists all pursue a simple, obvious strategy in the face of crisis: they tell the story of Jesus. And when we preach today in the face of perceived crisis, we had best do the same. Why? Because unless we continue boldly to tell this story we may lose sight of why we should preach at all. We tell this story not merely to preserve old traditions, nor to prop up cherished institutional structures. We tell this story, rather, because the world—and we ourselves—need to hear that the peace, salvation, and security offered by the powers of this world are illusions. We tell this story because we—and the world around us—need to know that there is but one real power: the power of a merciful God and crucified messiah. We tell this story because it is the word that can bring salt where the senses have grown dull, light where there is darkness, and life where there is evident death. We tell this story because it alone has the power to bring into being a peculiar community that, although broken, doubting, and filled with betrayers, nonetheless witnesses to God’s continuing presence in our midst. There may be other reasons for continuing to preach a two thousand year old story today—for example, the perceived need to revitalize decaying institutions—but these are likely to distract us from the heart of our vocation. We need to trust that the story itself will generate a new people and vital social structures, as it has repeatedly throughout the history of the Church. In the face of crisis, we tell the

story of Jesus!

Matthew: A Missionary Gospel

Matthew's Gospel, in particular, provides us with exceptional resources for dealing with crises of identity and vocation, not least because Matthew's telling of the story of Jesus leads to the commissioning of a missionary people. As the missiologist David Bosch puts it: "It was primarily because of his missionary vision that Matthew set out to write his gospel, not to compose a 'life of Jesus' but to provide guidance to a community in crisis on how it should understand its calling and mission."¹ In other words, Matthew's response to a crisis of identity and vocation in the Church of the first century was to tell the story of Jesus in such a way that a decision about missionary vocation would be unavoidable. Ultimately, every story, every image, every speech that Matthew recounts finds its resolution in Jesus' words to his disciples (and to us!) as he commissions them on the mountaintop in Galilee. As we review some characteristic aspects of Matthew's work, I intend to lift up not only Matthew's missionary content, but the strategies this evangelist employs to shape a missionary people, and consider what it would mean to preach Matthew missionally.

The missionary focus of this Gospel is most obvious, of course, in the conclusion of the story, the Great Commission. The commissioning of the eleven disciples is the not the only place, however, where Matthew's missionary sensibilities are evident. Matthew's Jesus, for example, offers commentary on his own sense of calling: he has come not for the righteous, but to call the sinners (9:13). He discerns that this is a time of harvest, and prays for laborers (9:37-38). He sends the twelve disciples out to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" to announce that the "reign of heaven is at hand" (10:6-7). For Matthew, mission is tied closely to images of hospitality at table with the sinners and "least ones" (e.g., 9:10-13, 25:31-46), to the work of healing and restoring the lost (e.g., 8:1-17, 15:34-36), and to the repeated calls for mercy over religious performance (9:13, 12:1-8). Its theological roots are in the conviction that God is both present with us in human experience and the source of genuine power, but power that is at work in mercy rather than exclusion, in forgiveness rather than self-righteousness.

As the larger story continues to unfold, it becomes clear that Jesus is preparing his disciples, fallible and wrong-headed as they are, to continue his mission after he has been crucified (16:18-19, 24:3ff.). The gospel of the kingdom will be preached by Jesus' disciples "throughout the whole world, as a witness to all nations; and then God will finish everything" (24:14; author's translation). In short, Matthew's Gospel is through and through a story rooted in, about, and leading to *mission*.

Reading Matthew Through the Lens of the Great Commission

It is the Great Commission itself, however, that makes Matthew's missionary perspective unavoidably clear and distinctive. In contrast, one occasionally encounters thinking that seems to discount the importance of the Great Commission within the larger Gospel. Scholarship has at times tended to treat this as merely one possible ending among many, or as an ending that bears no essential relationship to the rest of Matthew's story except as a literary depository of key themes. The displacement of the Great Commission is also connected to the tendency among some recent interpreters to regard the historical mission to the nations as a social necessity; i.e., in the face

of the (supposed) widespread failure of the early Christian mission to Israel, the church turned to the Gentiles, a more receptive audience. In this view, the Great Commission merely dresses in theological finery what was, in fact, the crude historical reality of survival tactics. But what if we were to presume not that the Great Commission is only incidental in relation to the rest of Matthew's story of Jesus, not just one possible ending among many, nor an attempt to paint cold history with the brush of theological triumphalism? What if we were to assume, rather, that for this evangelist, the Great Commission was the one right and necessary ending to the story of Jesus? (We might also usefully ask, putting the matter the other way around, in what way the rest of Matthew's Gospel is the right story for this particular ending.) I want to pursue this task by focusing on those elements that Matthew coordinates with the disciples' mission in the account of the Great Commission: Jesus as divine presence and Jesus' comprehensive power.

Jesus as Divine Presence

What difference does it make that God has entered human history in the person of Jesus? What difference does it make that this Gospel begins with the claim that Jesus is "God with us" (1:23) and closes with the claim that the crucified and resurrected Jesus continues to be with the disciples in mission until the close of the age (28:20)? Still more to the point, what have mission and God's presence in Jesus to do with one another?

The fact that Matthew "bookends" this Gospel with the assertion that Jesus is "God with us" suggests that the whole narrative functions as a description of God's presence in the world. For Matthew, God's entry into human history in Jesus marks the decisive turning point in both the story of God's people and the story of the world. It also points us toward the places where God's presence is most likely discerned, and calls into being new ways of seeing the world.

Matthew creatively blends two literary genres from the first century in order to suggest that this story is unlike any other. The use of the genealogy, the alternation of narrative and discourse (notable in Matthew are the five great "sermons," 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 23-25), and Matthew's recurrent references to the fulfillment of Israel's scriptures all suggest that Matthew is telling this story according to the paradigms of Jewish history writing, in which the goal is to depict the forces that alter the story of a people. But the use of the genealogy, the focus on Jesus' character, the integrity of his words and deeds, and the focus on his birth and death would suggest to a first century audience a genre more like Hellenistic biography, in which the goal is to shape the practices of disciples. Matthew is clearly interested in both. This story thus proclaims that Jesus is both a surpassing model for his disciples (biography) and the force whose life changes the course of history (historiography).

Both of these agendas are already at work in the genealogy with which the Gospel begins. While many readers regard the genealogy as the most boring way to begin a story that one could imagine, it is, in fact, a carefully constructed, richly suggestive, and devastatingly surprising introduction. Matthew structures the genealogy around Israel's great historical epochs, thereby suggesting that Jesus, as the last generation of the third epoch, brings that era to a close and inaugurates the next. The use of the passive voice to introduce Jesus' birth ("Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom was begotten Jesus, who is called Christ"; 1:16), breaks the repetitive cycle of active

begettings that structure the rest of the genealogy, thereby hinting that Jesus is something decisively new while also suggesting divine agency in the birth of Jesus.

Matthew also surprises us with references to some of the more infamous women in Israel's story—Tamar (1:3), Rahab and Ruth (1:5), and Bathsheba, who is designated not by her name but by the phrase “the wife of Uriah” (1:6), thereby underlining the illegitimacy of David's relationship with her. These are not the great ancestral mothers of Israel, but outsiders, marginal women who nonetheless make the story of Israel possible. As Matthew will later make clear in the parable of the sheep and the goats (25:31-46), God's presence is to be discerned among “the least of these,” among whom we encounter divine presence and power, not to mention exemplary faith and discernment (8:5-13, 15:21-28). Here we have the first hint of one of Matthew's enduring strategies: God's mission in Jesus takes place among and requires the participation of people at the margins of power and respectability. We follow Jesus in mission not when we build ever larger buildings, or when we invite in the rich and powerful, or those most like us, but when we locate ourselves as he did among the weak, the powerless, and the marginal. Matthew is telling a community in crisis that God's presence (and the experience of salvation) is discovered in glad solidarity with ones such as these.

Matthew's story of Jesus also suggests that God's presence in history impinges on the way we discern reality itself. This Gospel tells a story that transcends both the temporal and spatial dimensions of human experience, the categories by which humans order their relationships with one another and with the rest of the experienced creation. As the genealogy suggests, Jesus brings Israel's story to fulfillment, but also sets a new era in motion. This new era is still historical, but also definitively eschatological, which is to say that the power and reign of God are already reality in the mission of Jesus—and also in that of his disciples. When the Great Commission announces the ongoing presence of the risen Lord, it affirms the earth-shaking, world-renewing, and life-restoring (viz., eschatological) character of the disciples' mission. Time now belongs to God, and is measured not primarily by the passing of years, but by experiences of divine presence and by the extension of God's reign. In God's presence, past, present, and future lose their significance. Worship of God (cf. 28:17) is the place where this should be most clear to Jesus' disciples.

Matthew's eschatology also has a definitively “spatial” quality. Just as God's presence in Jesus blurs the temporal categories by which humans seek to order life, so also God's presence blurs the “spatial” boundaries, especially the operant boundaries between the human and the divine. This is evident in Jesus' healings, miracles, and teachings, especially his parables. In each of these realms, Jesus stretches and bends his disciples' perceptions. In the story of the healing of the paralytic (9:1-8), even the crowds perceive that Jesus' offer of forgiveness marks the entry of divine power into human agents (9:8). When Jesus walks on the water and takes Peter for a brief stroll with him, he manifests within humanity a power that only God has (14:22-33). Not only Jesus has these powers, but his disciples, as well, if they only have faith. In all of these stories the boundary between the human and the divine is being crossed and blurred. A new way of seeing the world is coming into being!

Jesus' parables, where the ordinary always gives way to the fantastic, also are designed to stretch our perceptions of reality: seeds bear thirty, sixty, and hundred fold (13:1-9), mustard seeds grow into huge trees where the birds can make their nests

(13:31-32), and the great king is found among the least ones (25:31-46). As Jesus himself explains, not everyone has eyes to see and ears to hear (13:10-17). Apparently, Jesus' mission entails the nurturing of a new imagination, a decisively new perception of what is possible for human beings in the world. In the world of mission with the risen Jesus, perhaps we can even learn to love our enemies (5:43-48), just as Jesus loved his betraying disciples and the people of Israel who called for his death. Preaching the Gospel of Matthew missionally thus also entails the use of strategies that open up space for people to hear and see in new ways, especially to discern the presence of God in power in our midst.

Jesus' Comprehensive Power

"All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (28:18). With these words the crucified and risen Jesus claims lordship that comprehends the whole of reality, both divine and human realms. We tend to read these words today thinking that Matthew is making some kind of religious claim about Jesus, but in the world of the first century, with Jews, Christians, and pagans alike trying to come to terms with Roman power, a claim of comprehensive power in both the human and divine realms would have had a decisively *political* ring as well. In fact, few people in the first century would probably have been able to make much sense of our compartmentalization of life into categories such as religion, politics, economics, and society. These were, in their imagination and practices, related dimensions of a single reality. Caesar himself was the embodiment of comprehensive power, and the cult of Caesar was probably the most prominent competitor either Jews or Christians would have encountered.² This competition was not just about the capacity to establish a new religion, but more profoundly about shaping a new imagination of reality and the practices to go with it. This necessarily entailed the construction of a new understanding of power.

Power, or authority, is one of Matthew's primary concerns. It is demonstrated clearly in Jesus' capacities to heal, to calm storms, to multiply loaves, and finally, to overcome death. The crowds in Matthew also discern that when Jesus' teaches, he exercises a quality of power that they have not seen even among their scribes (7:28-29). A centurion somehow discerns that Jesus has such power that he can heal just by a word, without even being physically present (8:5-13). When he heals a paralytic (9:1-8), Jesus demonstrates that the "son of humanity" has the power both to forgive sins (heretofore an exclusively divine attribute) and to heal. Jesus shares much of this power with his disciples at the beginning of their mission among the house of Israel (10:1). It is this power, transcending the boundaries of the human and the divine, that finally brings Jesus to his climactic confrontation with the authorities in Jerusalem. Because he has cleansed and taken possession of the Temple, healing and caring for the blind, the lame, and the children (21:12-17), the chief priests and elders of the people demand to know what kind of authority Jesus is exercising and its source (21:23). When they are unable to force an answer from him on their terms, the wheels of earthly power are set in motion that will finally crush Jesus' life. In Matthew, Jesus goes to the cross precisely because he demonstrates a kind of power that is both superior to and of a different kind than that exercised by the Judean authorities.

Jesus' conflict with the Jerusalem authorities makes clear what is implicit in the rest of the Gospel — namely, that Matthew wants not merely to claim for Jesus a power

that is greater than that of his opponents, but that he wants to redefine the nature of legitimate power altogether. Jesus' power heals, restores, and moves people into God's reign. It breaks down boundaries and generates fresh imagination. His opponents' power divides Israel, preserves boundaries, and serves the interests of the rich and powerful. It seeks to preserve a static world, where humans remain caught in webs of blindness and disease.³ The powers against which Matthew contrasts Jesus' unique authority ultimately must turn to violence to have their way: Herod's murder of the infants at the beginning of the Gospel (2:16-18) foreshadows the violent power that will finally claim Jesus on the cross.

In Matthew's vision, the violent power of the Jewish leaders and the mobs intersects with a denial of God's power and presence in the world. This is why Matthew's vision of mission requires the twin mandates of divine power and presence in the resurrected Jesus. And this is also why the proclamation of the gospel in our day requires both fresh imagination to discern God's presence and practices of healing, restoring, and forgiving. Where power is exercised to exclude, to preserve the status quo, to crush the poor and the marginal—there we may hear God's name invoked, but the power we see at work is not God's. Where the weak and poor are lifted up, where human perceptions of reality are swept away in floods of faith (17:14-20), and where the wholeness of creation is restored—there the disciples of Christ can name God's power and presence.

Rediscovering Mission Today

In the midst of the crises of identity and vocation now enveloping many North American churches, we are also witnessing renewed calls for mission. Often, however, this rediscovery of the importance of mission appears to be rooted more in concerns about survival than in a powerful and fresh perception of mission as the definitive vocation and identity of disciples of Jesus Christ. While many churches have come to regard mission as an appendage of congregational life, one thing among many that we do as part of our Christian life, for the New Testament writers in general and for Matthew in particular, mission is nothing less than the essential, embodied response of would-be disciples to the call of Christ. Without mission there is no discipleship, no Church, and no meaningful engagement with the world around us, where God is already at work. Matthew's call to mission is a call to fresh imagination, to new power, to life in the presence of enemies and least ones, and to the surprising, transforming experience of God among us.

Notes

¹ David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1991), 57

² See, for example, S R F Price, *Rituals and Power The Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Richard A Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997), Richard A Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1997), Dieter Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul's Practice and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991)

³ The best development of the motif of static versus moving, de-centralized patterns of power can be found in the work of Amy-Jill Levine, *The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988)