

Expositions of Matthew, Chapters 1-4
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Introducing the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew 1:1-17

I. Exposition's of Matthew's Gospel

October 26, 1997

Among the gospels, Matthew has been the most used and most influential in the history of the church. It alone has the account of the wise men, of the slaughter of the innocents, of the flight into Egypt. It alone records the Sermon on the Mount, a number of the parables (e.g. wheat and tares, yeast, hidden treasure, fine pearl, dragnet, unmerciful servant, workers in the vineyard, two sons, king's servant, ten virgins, ten talents - 13:24-51; 18:23-25; 20:1-16; 21:28-32; 22:1-14; 25:1-46) and His teaching on the church. One commentator claims that "mainstream Christianity was, from the early second century on, to a great extent Matthean Christianity" (R.T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 20). It was more quoted in early Christian writings than any other of the gospels. Its emphasis upon the ethical requirements of the Christian life, particularly the demands of discipleship, made it popular in the new churches of the early centuries. Over the years I found it to be particularly useful in presenting the life and teaching of Jesus to new or aspiring converts. Once I asked a "seeker" to read aloud with me the Sermon on the Mount, and was astonished at the power of the words of Christ. Many prefer John's gospel as an evangelistic tool. I prefer Matthew. Nowhere do we have a fuller account of his words and teaching. Our study cannot but be fruitful, whether we come to it as a disciple of Christ, or as an inquirer.

Prolegomena

Let us first look at some of the details surrounding the writing of this gospel.

1. Date

The unanimous testimony of the early church is that Matthew the apostle was the author of the first gospel. If this is the case, then it was written "not later than the early sixties," says Morris (8). Modern scholars have argued back and forth on the issue, some arguing for a much later date, between the 70's and 90's, others for the early period between the late 50's and early 60's. For a number of reasons, it seems better to understand it to have been written before the flight of the Christians from Jerusalem in 64 and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70.

2. Place

Nothing is known about the place of writing, except that if it is true that it is mainly targeting a Jewish audience, then it is likely to have been written in Palestine or one of the cities in Syria which had a large Jewish population (e.g. Antioch).

3. Author

As mentioned above, the early extra-biblical authors all attribute authorship to Matthew (e.g. Irenaeus, Origin, Eusebius). Most modern scholars doubt that this is the case, but for reasons that are unpersuasive. The text of Matthew itself does not name an author, though the oldest existing manuscripts are missing the title page on which the name of the author would normally have appeared. The oldest manuscripts which have the title-page intact attribute authorship to Matthew. There are no compelling reasons not to accept the tradition that Matthew wrote Matthew. Matthew was a tax gatherer, a class of people hated by the Jews and regarded by them as collaborators with the Romans or even traitors. His call by Jesus to be a disciple is recorded in Mt 9:9, where we read,

And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, 'Follow Me!' And he rose, and followed Him.
(Matthew 9:9)

As a tax gatherer Matthew would have had one skill likely to be lacked by fishermen such as Peter and James, that of recording events on paper. He was equipped, in other words, to perform the task of compiling this gospel.

Themes

Why was this gospel written? What are the important themes or characteristics that we can discover?

1. This is a biblical gospel. Repeatedly Matthew uses the formula, “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet.” One source counts 61 quotations from the Old Testament in this Gospel, compared with 31 in Mark, 26 in Luke, and 16 in John. Consequently it is also a *Jewish* gospel. The Jewish theme is so strong that most commentators have concluded that the author must be a Jew, well acquainted with Jewish customs, which he often doesn't find necessary to explain (compare 15:1-9 with Mark 7:1-13). The point of his Old Testament citations is to prove that Christianity is the fulfillment of Old Testament religion. All that God promised in the Old Testament, and all that Israel experienced is fulfilled in Jesus. He is the true Israel, who like the old Israel goes down into Egypt, and is called out again; who spends forty days in the wilderness paralleling the nation's forty years; who climbs the mountain to deliver to his people the law. Who calls twelve disciples to follow him even as Israel had its twelve patriarchs and tribes (2:13ff; 4:1ff; 5:1ff). Barclay summarizes:

Jesus' birth and Jesus' name are the fulfillment of prophecy (1:21-23); so are the flight to Egypt (2:14,15); the slaughter of the children (2:16-18); Joseph's settlement in Nazareth and Jesus' upbringing there (2:23); Jesus' use of parables (13:34,35); the triumphal entry (21:3-5); the betrayal for thirty pieces of silver (27:9); the casting of lots for Jesus garments as He hung on the Cross (27:35). It is *Matthew's* primary and deliberate purpose to show how the Old Testament prophecies received their fulfillment in Jesus; how every detail of Jesus' life was foreshadowed in the prophets; and thus to compel the Jews to admit that Jesus was the Messiah.(p. xxii)

He is frequently and directly called by Old Testament titles such as the Messiah, or “Christ” (referred to as such 17 times; cf. Mark 7 times, Luke 12, John 19 times). He is the king of Israel, the “Son of David,” a title with what Morris calls “overtones of royalty” (8 times). He refers to the kingdom of heaven, of God, of the Son of Man, or simply the “kingdom” 46 times. The meaning is “that the divine kingdom has drawn near in the person of Jesus,” in fulfillment of the God's purpose, and is, as Morris points out, “a Jewish way,” or Biblical way of looking at it (4). Those who wish to chop-up the Bible and make it say different things in different places will have a hard time in Matthew. He will help us to understand the essential unity of the Bible, as Jesus fulfills all that was promised and all that was foreshadowed in the Old Testament.

2. It is a gospel for the church. By the time that Matthew was written the church was an identifiable group, distinct from Judaism (which it was not during the lifetime of Jesus). He alone of the Evangelists records Jesus as using the word “church.” He alone records Jesus' promise to build His church on the occasion of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ. He alone records Jesus' instructions on solving problems in the church and of the power of binding and loosing (16:18; 18:17). In addition, Matthew places a special emphasis on the teaching of Jesus, which of course has in mind the instruction of the church. This may be seen over against narrative sections, which Matthew shortens when compared with Mark or Luke. Matthew's emphasis on teaching can even be seen in the clarity of his Greek prose, which one scholar has said in comparison to Plato's prose is like the difference between a well-written newspaper

column and Shakespeare. He puts a good deal of it into a form which might be easily memorized, arranging things, for example, in threes (three messages to Joseph, three denials of Peter, three questions of Pilate), sevens (groupings of fourteen in the genealogy, seven parables in ch 13, seven woes in ch. 23), as well as other numerical groups.

Some scholars identify five major sections devoted exclusively to teaching:

- chs. 5-7 - The Sermon on the Mount
- ch. 10 - Discipleship
- ch. 13 - Parables
- ch. 18 - Greatness and forgiveness in the Kingdom
- chs. 23-25 - Eschatology

Other scholars see seven sections, pointing for example to the importance of ch. 11. The differences between the scholars serves to point out that Matthew is rich in teaching, both in the narrative and sections of teaching.

Thus for those of us who long to hear the direct teaching of Jesus, this is a gold mine. Of course we don't contrast the words of Jesus with any other words in the Bible. They are all the word of God and of equal authority and weight. We don't adhere to a "red letter" Christianity where Jesus' words are more precious than other words in the Bible. The words of Jesus that we have come to us indirectly anyway, through Matthew. Matthew wrote in Greek, Jesus spoke Aramaic. Thus even Matthew *interprets* the words of Jesus to us. Having said this, still it is helpful for apologetic purposes, for example, to show that there is complete harmony between Jesus and the rest of Scripture, to know what exactly Jesus is recorded as saying since so many skeptics wish to contrast the words of Jesus with those of the Old Testament or even Paul and the apostles. Matthew presents us the words of Jesus in their fullness. We will hear him deliver his incomparable beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called son of God. (Matthew 5:3-9)

We will hear Him say of the Old Testament law,

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:17,18)

We will hear Him teach His disciples to pray saying

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. (Matthew 6:9-13)

He will challenge our priorities in life by saying,

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal. (Matthew 6:19-21)

He will call us to trust our Father in heaven as he exhorts us,

For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?...And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? (Matthew 6:25, 28-30)

He will warn us in Matthew to “judge not lest we be judged” (7:1). We will hear him invite us to Himself saying,

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

We will study His many parables (especially chapter 13), His warnings about tradition (15:1-13), and His exposing the heart of man (15:15-20). He will call us to discipleship saying,

If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:24-26)

He will teach us about the church, promising us that He will “build” His church, and that “the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (chapters 16 and 18). He will teach us about marriage and divorce solemnly warning us that “what God has joined together, let no man break asunder” (19:6). He will teach us about ministry to children as he says,

Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. (Matthew 19:14)

We will also hear Him speak the harshest words ever recorded from His lips as He will condemn the Pharisees saying,

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. (Matthew 23:27)

We will hear him lament,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. (Matthew 23:37)

We will hear him warn of things to come:

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. (Matthew 24:34)

We will hear him divide the sheep and goats, bless the former and curse the latter saying,

Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels, (Matthew 25:41)

Finally we will study Matthew's full account of Jesus' words on the occasion of His death, burial and resurrection (chapters 26-28).

If you are the sort of person who wants your "religion" to leave you alone, and leave your lifestyle and prejudices untouched, don't join us for these studies of Matthew's gospel! We are going to find ourselves continually challenged by the most profound words ever spoken. My challenge to those who are not yet believers is this: read this gospel and see if by the end you are not compelled to acknowledge that this Jesus is One who is worthy of your unreserved worship and service. Let me also challenge our members to bring your neighbors and friends, and let them hear Jesus ask the great questions, and let them struggle along with the rest of us to reevaluate the direction and purpose of our times.

3. It is dominion oriented gospel. As mentioned above, the kingdom is a prominent theme in Matthew. Barclay calls the idea of Jesus as king as "Matthew's dominating idea" (xxvi). Again, Barclay may summarize for us.

Right at the beginning the genealogy is to prove that Jesus is the Son of David (1:1-17). The title, Son of David, is used oftener in *Matthew* than in any other gospel (15:22; 21:9; 21:15). The wise men come looking for Him who is King of the Jews (2:2). The triumphal entry is a deliberately dramatized claim to be King (21:1-11). Before Pilate, Jesus deliberately accepts the name of King (27:11). Even on the Cross the title of King is affixed, even if it be in mockery, over his head (27:37)...*Matthew's* picture of Jesus is the picture of the man born to be King. Jesus walks through *Matthew's* pages as if in the purple and gold of royalty. *Matthew* is concerned to show to men the lordship of Jesus Christ, to show us that indeed His is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory.(xxvi)

Jesus teaches us what the kingdom is like, introducing His parables ten times with the phrase, "the kingdom of heaven is like - ." The kingdom is present in the person of Jesus (4:17; 12:28), and it is also future (25:31). What is the Kingdom of God? Simply, it the *rule* of God. That rule is present wherever Christ is believed, honored and obeyed, but it will not be consummated until the end of the age. It is "already" but it is also "not yet." The anticipation of this consummation is an important theme for Matthew's gospel, and for the Christian life. His account of the Olivet discourse in Matthew 24 is the fullest of all the gospels. He alone follows it with an entire chapter given to parables which elaborate on the theme of last things and judgment, with the parables of the wise and foolish virgins (25:1-13), of the talents (25:14-30), and the sheep and goats (25:31-46).

It is in the light of this "apocalyptic" interest that we should understand the emphasis given to *mission* in Matthew. The gospel ends with the "Great Commission," in which Jesus charges His disciples to "go."

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ (Matthew 28:18-20)

The nations, he says, are to be disciplined, baptized, and taught “all things” that Christ has commanded. This is where the Kingdom is going. This is the goal toward which history is moving. This Gentile theme is prominent throughout the gospel, beginning with the adoration of the magi (2:1-12), the ministry in Galilee (4:14-16, 23-25), the healing of the servant of the centurion (8:5-13), the parables of the kingdom (esp. 13:36-52), the healing of and commendation of the Syrophenician woman (15:21-28), and Jesus’ promises that the gospel must go to the Gentiles before the end will come (24:9,14; cf 10:18).

In this respect, this is fundamentally an optimistic book.

Many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; (Matthew 8:11)

“Many,” Jesus says. Not a handful, not a few, but *many*. “All authority has been given to Me,” he says to give us hope of success as He charges us to “Go therefore and make disciples.” “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age,” He adds for further encouragement. It is a converted world that Matthew’s gospel has in view, of which the Magi are but token representatives, or even the first fruits of adoring nations (Psalm 72).

Such a hopeful, positive book is a delight to read in our times of Christian decline in the West. Everywhere we see reversal. Public morals are at an all time low, Christian views are mocked in the media, Christian teaching is blamed for a number of social ills. But Jesus promises in Matthew “I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Matthew will encourage a mission-minded church such as ours. It will encourage us to press on in our evangelizing of Savannah, and even to the ends of the earth.

Son of David, Son of Abraham

Matthew 1:1-17

II. Exposition’s of Matthew’s Gospel

November 2, 1997

The opening section of Matthew’s gospel contains the list of ancestors which make up the genealogy of Jesus. This may seem like a strange way to begin a book, one by modern standards almost guaranteed to persuade the reader to give up and close the book. But the Jews of antiquity were very interested in genealogy. For example Josephus, the great Jewish historian, begins his work with his own genealogy. Actually this interest is not that remote to us especially here in the south. People here are still very interested in the identity of one’s family and ancestors. The high school yearbook of a friend of mine in South Carolina had as a gag the “what me worry” picture of *Mad Magazine*’s Alfred E. Newman. Her mother was thumbing through the pictures one day and her gaze fixed upon the picture of Newman. She studied it carefully and then asked her daughter, “Who is that boy’s family?” That is the question being answered by the genealogy. In fact, most people in the world are this way. A friend was recently telling me of an extended visit to Ireland. Everyone in the little community in which she stayed knew everyone else’s family going back four centuries. I was recently reading in *National Geographic* an article which retraced the steps of Genghis Khan’s conquests through

central Asia. In one small village they interviewed a man who told of how the Moguls swept into town and killed nearly everyone, relating the story, the correspondent noted, *as though it had happened yesterday*. Memories are long in most parts of the world. Who you are, and who your family is, counts. To a people who despised Herod the Great because he was half Edomite, Jesus' lineage back to Abraham and David is being proven.

Specifically here, the point is not to satisfy social curiosity but to establish *legitimacy*. Legitimacy then and now depends upon proving authentic descent from the founders. For example, in American political discussion today it is vital that one be able to show legitimate philosophical descent from the Founding Fathers. I can recall seeing pictures of the American Nazi party rally at Madison Square Party. Giant banners draped side by side had alternating pictures of George Washington and swastikas. American communists do the same sort of thing. Every one from the extreme left to the extreme right must show that their platform fulfills the essence of the "American dream." They must show that their program is the logical extension of the principles first articulated by the founding generation. Fail to do so, and one's views will be tagged as "un-American" or foreign and you will quickly be consigned to political oblivion. Alternatively, the quickest way to discredit an opponent is to demonstrate that their program betrays the vision of the Founding Fathers. The difference between the first century in Palestine and the twentieth century today is that it was necessary then to show just philosophical/theological descent, but physical descent as well.

So we indeed do come to this chapter understanding both an interest in genealogy and its connection to legitimacy, at least more so than we might have first have thought. Let us then look at the purposes served by verses 1-17 of Matthew's gospel.

Old Testament Promises Fulfilled

First, the genealogy aims to demonstrate that Jesus Christ fulfills the central promises of the Old Testament.

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
(Matthew 1:1)

The opening phrase, "the book (*biblos*) of the genealogy," is based on the traditional translation of the Greek word *genesis* ("genealogy"). Many commentators have then taken this as the title of the first section (vv 1-17) of the chapter, in which the genealogy of Jesus is contained. Others have applied it to the whole initial section extending all the way to 2:23, indicating that what follows is a "record of the origins of Jesus Christ." However it may be better to take it as the title for the whole gospel. Morris renders it, "The book of the story of Jesus Christ..." The same phrase is used in Gen 2:4 and 5:1, where its meaning undoubtedly is "account" (as in the NASV and NIV) or "history." His meaning then would be that his whole book is the "story" of Jesus the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah (the meaning of the Greek *christos*). His sparing use of "Christ" in his gospel (only 17 times, and in combination with "Jesus," only here with certainty, given the doubts raised by the manuscripts regarding 1:18 and 16:21) means that it is functioning for him not as a proper name (as it later came to be for Christians) but as a title. "This is the story of Jesus the Christ."

The next phrase, "the son of David, the son of Abraham," tells us what verses 2-17 are designed to prove. "Son of David" points to Jesus' royal descent, and should be seen as a Messianic title. Matthew refers to David 17 times, more than any other NT book. Jesus is the promised Davidic Messiah. Typically the title "son of David" is used when people are appealing to Jesus for help (9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31), and also in the account of the triumphal entry (21:9, 15). This indicates, as Morris points out, "that Matthew is not unaware of the royal associations of the term" (20). God promised that David's "house," "kingdom," "descendants" and "throne," would last forever

(2 Sam 7:12-16; Ps 89:4,29). Jesus is presented as that descendant in whom the Davidic dynasty is established. Indeed it is established “forever” in Jesus Christ. He is that One of whom Isaiah wrote ,

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom,, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6,7)

Repeatedly Jesus’ Davidic ancestry is emphasized by the early church. Paul appeals to it in the opening of Romans (1:3), and in 2 Timothy (2:8). The risen Christ declares in the book of the Revelation,

I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star. (Revelation 22:16)

Perhaps most dramatically of all Peter says of David’s 16th Psalm that

because he was a prophet, and knew that God has sworn to him an oath to seat one of his descendants upon his throne, he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was neither abandoned to Hades nor did his flesh suffer decay. (Acts 2:30,31)

Jesus is that promised descendent who sits upon his throne. “Son of Abraham,” identifies Jesus as a son of the founder of the nation, to whom the covenant promises were made, and importantly, in whom the nations would be blessed (Gen 12:2,3; 15:17-21; 17:1-14). “In combining David and Abraham,” says Morris, “Matthew is drawing attention to two strands in Jesus’ Hebrew ancestry and implying that he fulfilled all that would be expected in a Messiah with such connections” (21).

Matthew means that Jesus fulfills nothing less than *all* the promises made to the nation of Israel. In Him the promises made to Abraham are fulfilled. In Him the promises made to David are fulfilled. In Him the promises made to the nation are fulfilled. “For as many as may be the promises of God,” writes Paul, “in Him they are yes” (2 Cor 1:20). He is the fulfillment of their hopes.

This continues to be our message to Israel and the world. Do not place your hopes in modern science, or the stock market, or in a modern nation state in Palestine. Do not look for some future Messiah, or a secular Messiah, or a New Age guru. Do not pray for a David to come and establish his people and rule. David has come. The Messiah has come. Jesus is that Promised One. Our hopes, Jewish and Gentile, are fulfilled only in Him.

According to Plan

Second, the genealogy is presented in such a way as to emphasize that Jesus the Christ comes in fulfillment of and according to the plan of God.

To Abraham was born Isaac; and to Isaac, Jacob; and to Jacob, Judah and his brothers; and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron; and to Hezron, Ram; and to Ram was born Amminadab; and to Amminadab, Nahshon; and to Nahshon, Salmon; and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king. And to David was born Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah; and to Solomon was born Rehoboam; and to Rehoboam, Abijah; and to Abijah, Asa; and to Asa was born Jehoshaphat; and to Jehoshaphat, Joram; and to Joram, Uzziah; and to Uzziah was born Jotham; and to Joram, Ahaz; and to Ahaz, Hezekiah; and to Hezekiah was born Manasseh; and to Manasseh, Amon; and to Amon, Josiah; and to Josiah were born Jeconiah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon, to Jeconiah was born Shealtiel; and to Shealtiel, Zerubbabel; and to Zerubbabel was born Abiud; and to Abiud, Eliakim; and to Eliakim, Azor; and to Azor was born Zadok; and to Zadok, Achim; and to Achim, Eliud; and to Eliud was born Eleazar; and to Eleazar, Matthan; and to Matthan, Jacob; and to Jacob was born Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. Therefore all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ fourteen generations. (Matthew 1:2-17).

The first issue with which to deal is that of the very different genealogy of Matthew and Luke. Some interpreters have argued that Matthew gives us the genealogy of Joseph (as legal father), and Luke of Mary (the actual line). Critics of this view counter that genealogies were never reckoned through the mother. This rebuttal, however, cannot be considered decisive because a case in which there is no human father is unprecedented. More troubling is that Luke speaks of "Joseph the son of Eli" (Lk 3:23). In other words, Luke appears to be giving us Joseph's line as well. Morris believes that the best suggestion is that of J.G. Machen in *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, in which he argues that Matthew's list represents the legal descendants of David, those who would actually have reigned had the kingdom continued, while Luke records the descendants of David through Joseph's line. In the end, however, Morris concedes, "we have no way of being certain" (22).

The list itself seems to have been compiled from 1 Chron 1-3, Ruth 4, and other unknown extra biblical sources. He intentionally groups them into 3 sections of 14 names each. Such symmetry was only possible by omitting certain names. Rarely were such lists exhaustive in any modern sense. Such was typically done in antiquity, the designation "father" being used of any descendant. These groupings seem to serve two purposes. First, they are so organized in order to facilitate memorization. The second is to highlight the three stages in the history of Israel, as emphasized in v 17.

What is the point of so organizing Israel's history: fourteen generations from Abraham to David; fourteen generations from David to the Deportation, fourteen generations from the Deportation to Christ? It puts the Davidic Kingship at the center of it. The first period culminates in the establishment of David's line. The second period culminates in the loss of the Davidic line. The third period culminates in the reestablishment of the Davidic line in Jesus. Commentators further note that the numerical value of David's name is fourteen (D=4; W=6; D=4; there are no vowels in Hebrew). This may or may not have influenced Matthew's writing.

Thus the presentation of the genealogies underscores the sovereignty of God in history. God is in control. There is a timeliness to Christ's arrival. He came at just the right time. It was at the time of God's plan and choosing. It was in fulfillment of the plan of God. It was as the culmination of the whole history of Israel. This is a great comfort to the people of God. The

world seems to be careening out of control at times. Evil seems unrestrained and triumphant. Matthew is reminding us that all proceeds according to the plan of God.

God' Grace

Third, the genealogy seems designed to emphasize God's grace. There are three surprises in the genealogy. First, the inclusion of women in a genealogy is unusual, though not unprecedented. Tamar and Bathsheba are mentioned in 1 Chron 2:4 and 3:5. In Jewish writing four women are typically singled out - Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. But Matthew's four, Tamar, Rahab and Ruth, are Gentiles, and Bathsheba, not mentioned by name but as "the wife of Uriah," may be so designated to highlight the Gentile connection. That would be the second surprise. The third is that three of four (Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba) are of dubious morals, and the fourth, Ruth, was of race whose origins were in incest and who were banned from the Lord's assembly to the tenth generation (Gen 19:30-33; Deut 23:3). Tamar's child was conceived out of wedlock by Judah. Rahab was a harlot. Bathsheba's incident with David is well known. A deliberate point is being made, it would seem. Whether considered as women, as Gentiles, or as "fallen women," they represent God's grace in Christ to all sinners. Matthew is reminding the people of Israel that their nation's origins are hardly pure. The patriarchs and matriarchs committed vile sins, as did their ideal king. Moreover, Gentile blood was coursing through even the royal line. This might be the equivalent to reminding a white racist family that, by the way, their great-great grandmother was an African slave. Or it might be like reminding a self-righteous family, inclined to despise outsiders as unclean, that their grandmother was a harlot and great grandfather was guilty of incest! In other words, it is a reminder to people who are tempted to exclude or shun others because of the racial or moral inferiority from whence they have come. Of course the grace of God is for all - it was for you, wasn't it? If it could save you, with your sorry ancestral line, then God can save anybody, and, the Gospel is for everybody! None are excluded! All are included. How dare one "take on airs" of superiority towards others, and refuse to include them or help them or reach out to them! No - if God can save a "wretch like me," then no one is beyond His grasp. No one, Matthew is saying, is beyond God's grace in Christ.

Righteous Joseph

Matthew 1:18-25

III. Expositions of Matthew's Gospel

November 30, 1997

The words of this text are among the most well-known in the Bible. The "birth-narratives," as the commentators call them, are read every Christmas season in nearly every church in all of Christendom. They tell the story of the birth of the *divine*, the Christ, the Son of God, in the child Jesus. But they also tell a very *human* story as well. Joseph and Mary are real people who experienced these events in real space-time existence. They were alternately shocked, confused, dismayed, comprehending, submissive and thrilled as events unfolded. Luke tells the story of the birth of Jesus from the perspective of Mary, recording for us the angel's announcement to Mary and her response (the "Magnificat"). But Matthew tells us of the birth from the perspective of Joseph. For example, Matthew tells us of the angel's appearance to Joseph in a dream and traces his response, telling us nothing about Mary. Matthew's purpose seems to be

two fold: to introduce us to Joseph, telling us something of the kind of man he was, and to introduce us to the Child who is entering their (and our) world.

Joseph's Crisis

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)

Matthew speaks of Mary being “betrothed” to Joseph. This introduces a concept that is foreign to our culture and will require some explanation. Marriages in those days were typically arranged by parents on behalf of their children while they were still infants. Sometimes this was carried out with the help of a professional matchmaker. The prevailing notion was that marriage was too important a decision to be left to the discretion of the young people themselves. Their passions were certainly not thought to be a reliable guide in making a match. When the time for marriage came, the young people involved seemed to have a veto power over a given candidate. But otherwise they married the one selected for them by their parents. Lest you gasp in horror, we might note that the current system in effect today, where marriages are entered on the basis of romantic feelings, which might end up being attached to most anyone, are not terribly successful in producing happy marriages either. Love, after all, is primarily a decision. We don't choose our parents, our children, or our siblings, yet we love them, or, at least, usually do. Of course there are exceptions, as there were in arranged marriages. But the strongest loves that we have are those which grow over time, typically for those who are given to us. The older I get, and older my children get, a parental role in the selection of one's children's spouses looks wiser and wiser.

Once one agreed to marry the mate selected by one's parents, one entered a period of betrothal. Betrothal was like our engagement, except it was binding. It was viewed as the *first part of marriage*, as Morris points out, though the couple still lived with their respective families. The betrothed could be called the “wife” of her fiancé (Gen 29:41; Deut 22:23, 24), and the man could be called the girl's “husband” (e.g., Joel 1:8; Mt 1:19). A betrothed woman could be punished as an adulteress, whereas the punishment of an unbetrothed woman was different (Dt 22:23,24,28-29). Betrothal could only be broken by divorce. The *second part of marriage* was when the man brought his betrothed to his home. We are specifically told that Mary and Joseph had not yet “come together.” That she was “found to be with child” prior to this second part would be a serious offense, one which could have been punished by death, though this was not typically done in the first century. The passive voice probably reflects Joseph's point of view, as he became aware of the situation. “She was found to be with child,” we are told. We are immediately told that Mary's condition was “by the Holy Spirit,” but Joseph would not have known that initially. As her condition became evident, as such things inevitably do, it would have precipitated a personal crisis. Knowing how these things happen, he could only have concluded one thing - Mary had been unfaithful. He must have experienced the full range of human emotions at that time: anger at Mary for violating their marriage; disappointment and sorrow at the shattering of their plans for the future; confusion as to what to do next. How was he to handle this? What was he to do?

Joseph's Character

And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly. (Matthew 1:19)

Joseph is described as a “righteous” (*dikaios*) man, meaning that he was “careful in his observance of the law,” says Morris (27). As one concerned for the law he might have made an example of her by taking her to court and publicly humiliating her (Dt 22). But he did not conclude that a concern for righteousness required that he deal with her harshly. Matthew tells

us of this second aspect of Joseph's character. He did not want to "disgrace" her. The righteous are gracious as well as just (Ps 37:21). He determined instead to "put her away," a codeword for divorce (*apoluo*), "secretly" or privately. He did not have to take her to court. An Israelite man was merely required to hand his wife a "bill of divorce" in the presence of two witnesses and send her away (see Dt 24:1). What is impressive about this is that Joseph does not make a quick judgment, and when he does make a decision, it is one which carefully balances justice and love. Let's look at the first of these points.

1. Joseph doesn't act rashly. He doesn't respond impulsively. He doesn't lash out vindictively. As verse 20 goes on to say, he "considered this," literally, "while he thought on these things." He pondered this. He thought hard and long about it. He seems to be waiting for more light. He knows that he must do what is right. He is also a compassionate man, and so does not want to humiliate her more than is necessary to serve justice. So he waits, thinks, and most likely, prays. This is an aspect of Joseph's godliness that Matthew is highlighting. It is an example that we would do well to follow. Too often we make quick judgments about things concerning which we are not capable of making an informed determination. How do I know that this is what we typically do? Because this is what we all complain of when we are on the receiving end. We say that others are concluding what they are about us because they don't realize all the factors. We feel that it is so unfair. They condemn while they aren't aware of this and this and that! Why not wait? Why not show patience? Why not be more humble about it? Isn't it the height of self-righteousness and judgmentalism when we presume to quickly condemn another human being, when typically it is impossible for us to know enough to do so credibly? Joseph waits, even though as far as he is concerned there is no possibility that things could be other than they appear. We too should wait. We should give the benefit of the doubt. We should be slow to make a judgment.

2. Joseph judges precisely. There would be some who would say today that Joseph should forgive Mary and receive her back. Anyone could make a mistake. She's young. She merely lost her head in a moment of passion. "It could happen to anyone," they would continue. Then there are others who would take the opposite tact and argue, in effect, "off with her head." Stone her. Drag her into court and utterly humiliate her. Make her pay severely for what she has done. She has it coming, they would maintain. Give it to her. Both of these perspectives are wrong. The tension that must be carefully balanced is that between love and justice. Joseph seeks that balance.

Yes we must be loving, but we must also be just. We must not love in a way that compromises justice. Yes we must be just, but we must also love. We must not be just in a way that compromises love. The temptation is always to throw out one at the expense of the other. That is, to love and ignore justice, or to be just and ignore love. What Joseph manages is to do the *just* thing while doing so in a *loving* manner. He is a "righteous man" we are told. He does not want to "disgrace" her. Instead he desires to "put her away secretly." What Joseph is doing and what we must also learn to do is to maintain the tension between justice and love and not compromise one at the expense of the other. He does uphold righteousness by following through on divorcing her. She should be divorced and he determines that he will "put her away secretly." But he is not going to do this in a way that is harsh or cruel. He is not trying to exact his pound of flesh from her. This reveals a great deal about the character of Joseph about whom we are told so little from the biblical record. In this respect he is an example to the church in our dealings with one another individually as well as our life together. It is wrong to look at church discipline, for example, as being an inherently harsh or cruel thing. "Whom the Lord loves He disciplines." Love and discipline are not mutually exclusive. Discipline can be carried out in a way that is harsh or cruel. But it need not be. It can be done and indeed must be done in a way that has as its goal the repentance and restoration of the one who is disciplined, even as is true of a parent's discipline of his child. Love cannot be cited as an excuse for failing to discipline. Neither can the need for discipline be an excuse for failing to love. Where there is true

godliness, as in the case of Joseph, these two things will always be held in tension. We will love, but we will also vindicate righteousness. We will vindicate righteousness but we will also do so in a way that is loving rather than harsh, or mean-spirited or cruel.

Joseph's Decision

Having carefully considered his alternatives and come to a decision, God then intervenes and redirects Joseph

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins. Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us.' (Matthew 1:20-23)

We'll come back to the theological content of these next few studies. For now we wish only to examine Joseph's response to what he is told. The angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Mary, he says, is still a virgin, the child within her is the result of the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, and He will be the Savior of His people in fulfillment of Is 7:14, Jesus, Immanuel, God with us.

How does Joseph respond to this extraordinary dream and stunning message? He responds with immediate obedience.

And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife. (Matthew 1:24)

Joseph got up from his sleep "and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." He did what he was told. Rather than ending the first stage of marriage, the betrothal, through divorce, he instead proceeded to the second stage, and "took her as his wife," that is, he took her home. They lived together from that point on as husband and wife, with one qualification:

and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. (Matthew 1:25)

They did not consummate the marriage until after the birth of Jesus. The imperfect tense, ("kept") notes Allen, "is against the tradition of perpetual virginity" (in Morris, 32)

Joseph's obedience is unquestioned and immediate. This too reveals his character. He was a man of God who submitted at once to the will of God for him. "Of course he did," someone might say, "God spoke directly to him. There was no mistaking what God wanted him to do. We don't have direct communication like that." The implication of this kind of thinking is that obedience is harder for us. I would resist this line of thought for two reasons.

First, God does speak to us directly through the Bible and still we disobey Him. Our circumstances are not so different from Joseph's as we might have thought. God tells us not to covet and still we do. God tells us not to gossip and still we do. God tells us not to steal and cheat and still we do. God tells us to pray and we still don't. God tells us to meditate on His Word and we still don't. We could go on and on. Clear, direct communication from God is no guarantee that we will do what we are told. Our problem, as Mark Twain observed long ago, is

not what we don't know, but what we do know and don't do. Jesus said in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus,

If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead. (Luke 16:31)

Second, obedience was costly for Joseph. Word had to have been out regarding Mary's condition. Yet Joseph agrees to marry her even though there will be no way for him to explain the circumstances to others. At least there'll be no way to explain without them erupting in laughter. For the rest of his life he will face rumors about the circumstances of this marriage. Even on the pages of the New Testament the accusation of the illegitimacy was hurled at Jesus. Joseph must do what he knows is right though many others will find his choice unthinkable. "Why is he doing that?" "How could he?" This marriage will cost him his reputation in the eyes of some. No doubt he will be ostracized and rejected by others. Yet, by naming the child, "Joseph officially accepted the child (cf. 'I have called you by name, you are mine,' Isa 43:1); this gave the child the status of a descendant of David," says Morris (29).

Joseph submits to the will of God and embraces that which will change his life forever. Nothing will ever be the same again for Joseph. Whatever dreams or hopes he had must now take a backseat to the needs of Jesus and His Kingdom. Make no mistake about it. This is no easy decision. Joseph must deny himself and subordinate his whole life to the requirements of God's plan.

In this too Joseph is an example of godliness for us. Our calling, like Joseph's, is to completely and immediately submit to God's regardless of the cost. As was the case with Joseph, there will be a cost. That cannot be avoided. There will be opportunities lost, pleasures denied, persecution endured. Yet Joseph leaves for us an example. Unquestioning obedience is to be our way as well as his.

A Virgin Shall Be with Child

Matthew 1:18-25

IV. Expositions of Matthew's Gospel

December 14, 1997

Up to a certain point, Mary and Joseph were an ordinary couple, betrothed and soon to be married, experiencing the usual hopes and fears, anxieties and aspirations. Then Joseph found out that his betrothed was expecting, and (worse yet) he was not the father. His initial response was a godly and exemplary one. He wished to divorce her privately rather than to publicly humiliate her. He carefully "considered" his response. And God rewarded his patience, humility, and reserve. God gave to him more light. He was granted a divine revelation concerning the Child.

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.' (Matthew 1:20)

While he was considering what might be the appropriate response to what appeared to be an inappropriate pregnancy, an angel, a supernatural messenger from God, appeared to him in a

dream and said, “Joseph, Son of David.” “Son of David” gives emphasis to Joseph’s (and consequently Jesus’) royal line and a hint to the meaning of this pregnancy. “Do not be afraid” means do not “shrink from doing something” that you ought to do, says Morris (29). Do not fear doing the right thing. “Do not fear taking Mary as your wife.” Why not? Now we will look in more detail at what we are told about this birth.

The Child’s Origins

First, the Child in her womb is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit. Mary was discovered “to be with child *by the Holy Spirit*,” Matthew tells us (v. 18). The angel says, “that which has been conceived in her (lit. “that which is in her”) is of (lit. “begotten” or “born of” or “originates from”) the Holy Spirit.” This is not explained at first. How the Holy Spirit is responsible for Mary’s condition is not initially elaborated. But Joseph is told that the Holy Spirit is at work. The Child is a miracle child. He need not fear proceeding with the marriage. Their future and her current condition has the approval of God. God is at work, doing something new.

Matthew fills in more details for us in verses 22 and 23:

Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which translated means, ‘God with us.’ (Matthew 1:22-23)

Matthew says that the work of the Holy Spirit in Mary took place in order to fulfill the promise recorded in Isaiah 7:14. Notice Matthew’s view of inspiration. What Isaiah the prophet said God said. The prophesy was “spoken by the Lord *through* the prophet.” This is why the Scripture is infallible and authoritative. Isaiah, the prophets, and the apostles did not write their own words. The Lord spoke and still speaks through them. “What does Scripture *say*,” Paul asks (Rom 4: 3). Scripture is typically personified in this way by the Biblical writers themselves because when Scripture speaks, God speaks. What Scripture says God says. Scripture is trustworthy because what God says is true, always. What God says in Scripture is true, always. It can be relied upon. What it predicts happens. What it promises and warns occurs. This is why you can build your life on this book. When someone asks you why you live as you do as a Christian, here is your answer. What the Bible says God says. What God says is true. When God speaks we listen. You may not want to listen to your mother or dad or teacher or boss or the IRS. But when God speaks, you better listen. I remember explaining this to boys in the fraternity house back in college. It is not hard to figure out why we choose to follow Christ, I’d say. It is really very simple. The Bible is true. There it is. The Bible is true. What it says about Jesus is true. If you are not yet a Christian this is worth pondering. You can depend upon what this book says. What it teaches you can believe. What it commands you can obey. Not only can you safely build your life on what it says, but you cannot safely ignore what it says. God Himself is speaking to you in His word. He is telling you what is true. He is telling you what He wants you to believe and do. You cannot afford not to listen.

But let us return to Matthew’s point. ***Second, the Child in her womb was conceived apart from human procreative activity.*** No male seed was involved. But let us return to Matthew’s point. The Holy Spirit wrought birth of Jesus will be a virgin birth, in fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy of Is 7:14. A “virgin” (*parthenos*, the technical term for virgin, as in the LXX), he says, “shall be with child, and shall bear a son.” In other words Mary, in fulfillment of Isa 7:14, has conceived a child apart from sexual activity. The Child has no human father. The male seed is not involved in this conception.

Clearly the Bible teaches the supernatural, virgin birth of Christ. Matthew tells us this four times in this text alone:

1. Mary was “with child” before she and Joseph “came together” (v 18).

2. That which was in Mary's womb was "conceived...of the Holy Spirit" (v 20).
3. A "virgin" would be "with child" (v 23).
4. Joseph "kept her a virgin" until Jesus' birth (v. 25).

Parthenos clearly must mean virgin in Matthew. Likewise Luke repeats the same in equally unambiguous contexts (Lk 1:34, cf. vv 27, 35). Mary for example, is responding to the announcement that she will conceive and bear a son by asking, "how can this be, since I am a *parthenos*?"

The Skeptics Attack

Yet it remains an article of faith among skeptics that this could not have happened. Turn-of-the-century liberals scoffed at the idea. They identified it as myth, similar to pagan stories of mating between humans and the gods. They were answered by the Scottish scholar James Orr and then supremely by J. Gresham Machen in *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930). Machen's work has never been answered by the liberals, yet they continue to jeer. Even today they will roll their eyes and chuckle at the mention of it. Why? Not because the Bible is unclear in what it is teaching. Not because it can be historically disproved. Not, one would think, because this is something God cannot do. Rather, it is because of the skeptic's assumptions or presuppositions. They don't believe because of what they bring to the discussion. It may be profitable for us to be more specific.

1. First, there is **their view of Biblical authority**. Can the Scripture be trusted in all things? Is it true not only in matters "religious" (narrowly defined) but also in matters of science and history? For them, the Bible is an important source of religious wisdom but limited by the cultural biases of its day and riddled with errors in matters of historical detail. This is really the crux of the matter. What are we to say when the Bible asserts to be true something that contradicts one of the cherished assumptions of our day? The doctrine of the virgin birth contradicts the tenants of naturalism. Other Christian teachings may collide with moral relativism, with feminism, with religious pluralism, and with sunny theories of human nature found in the various schools of psychology. The tension with our culture in these areas is constant for a Christian. You need do no more than turn on the television to find major doses of each. "Traditional" views of marriage, the roles of men and women, child-rearing, human origins, religious absolutes are viewed as either Neanderthal or fascist. Some so-called evangelical Christians have found the pressure to conform to the culture of the 1990's so great that they have advanced a theory of a "limited inerrancy," limiting the Bible's infallibility to those areas which are strictly "religious." The problem is that this puts me in the position of defining what is "religious" and isn't, what is true and what isn't, and what is believable and what isn't. I become the authority. Let me give an example. Is the virgin birth religious truth or historical? It's both, isn't it? How do you separate them? The virgin birth is rich with religious meaning. But it is also about a girl named Mary who conceived and gave birth to a boy named Jesus while remaining a virgin. If the "history" is not true, if she in fact was not a virgin at the time of his birth, then no religious significance can survive either. Christianity is a religion rooted in history. There are many religions that are more philosophy than religion. They are not related to historical events except as someone once stood up and taught some things. But Christianity claims to be historical. God reveals Himself in history. The Exodus happened in space and time. There was a land named Egypt, a man called Pharaoh, another named Moses, and so on. Likewise there was a Joseph, a Mary, and a baby Jesus. Remove the historical events of the gospel from the gospel message and the whole thing falls to the floor. You end up with no virgin birth, no teaching ministry, no healings, no crucifixion, and no resurrection. The Christian religion is interwoven with and dependent upon historical events. Paul says that if there is no resurrection, for example, our faith is "worthless" and we "are still in (our) sins" (1 Cor 15:17). Ultimately, one cannot separate historical details from religions. The attempt to do so will rob Scripture of its authority. Why? Because if it errs in the historical bits that are open to verification then how can it be trusted in the religious bits that are not? The Bible is either true

and authoritative or it isn't. It is not for us to pick and choose. If you start down that road, time plus logic will eventually take the Bible right out of your hands.

2. The second reason has to do with **their view of the supernatural**. Is our world an open or closed system? If it is closed, then outside intervention; that is, the intervention of that which is beyond the natural, is impossible. Carl Sagan introduced his television series on the universe by saying the universe is "all that there is or ever will be." If that is so, if he and other naturalists are correct, then miracles by definition cannot occur. There can be no virgin birth, no resurrection, in fact, no inspiration of Scripture. The system is closed. God does not speak or act within our system. All we have is us. Rudolph Bultmann, for example, says a resurrection from the dead is absolutely absurd. It is impossible. He says this not because of careful evaluation of historical data. He did not sit down and look at evidences and arguments for the resurrection. He rejected it categorically because of a philosophical bias against the supernatural. So much for open-mindedness. He reads the Scripture through an existentialist lens. He sees miracle stories as ways in which the gospel writers made concrete for others the fact that an encounter with Jesus made them feel better. They created stories to explain their faith, he would say. But is there evidence to support this assertion? Not a shred. All that we know points to men who wrote as they did because they were absolutely convinced that the things about which they wrote actually occurred. Matthew writes of a virgin birth because he believes, as did all of the early Christians, that Christ was truly born of a virgin. It is arbitrary and indefensible to exclude supernatural explanations of events merely because of a bias against them.

Importance

Does this mean that you have to believe in the virgin birth in order to be a true Christian? No, Christians are weak and often err. But it is a serious error, involving the rejection of clear scriptural teaching. Some church leaders have made the mistake of thinking that this is not a doctrine worth having a fight over. It doesn't strike at the "vitals" of the Christian faith they have thought and so have made peace with unbelief. But when the doctrine of the virgin birth is compromised, much more is lost as well.

First, the doctrine of Scripture is compromised. If it errs here, how can it be trusted elsewhere? If it is robbed of its authority here, how can it remain authoritative anywhere? Surely this is the history of the last 75 years of ecclesiastical history. When denominations and educational institutions abandoned the virgin birth, they lost much more. They were left holding an impotent Bible in their hands, and have seen one orthodox doctrine after another fall.

Second, the supernatural nature of the Christian religion is compromised. Are we to assume that God cannot miraculously bring about a conception in the womb of the virgin Mary without the male seed? If this is something that God cannot do, then it calls into question all the supernatural elements of the Christian religion. We may be left with ethics, but little else. Indeed ethics will not be preserved either, as the events of the past 75 years prove as well. Too much is given up when one gives up the virgin birth. The same anti-supernatural bias will next reject the inspiration of Scripture, then the atonement, then the resurrection, then the regeneration of sinners. One is left with a god who cannot speak, cannot act, cannot answer prayer, and cannot be known. Nothing will be left.

Third, possibly the dual nature of Christ is compromised. If the supernatural dimension of Christ's origins is compromised, then it is hard to see how His full deity and His sinless humanity could be maintained. Is He truly God? Then the divine "seed" must have been present from the beginning. Is He truly man? Then how could He have two human parents and still be exempt from human guilt and corruption? In the virgin birth we have the union of the human and divine that is the root of Christ's dual nature. He must be truly human if He is to be one with us and atone for our sin. He must be truly divine if He is to be without the guilt and corruption

of sin and able to endure the infinite wrath of God against sin. The virgin birth is the necessary foundation upon which this doctrine is built.

This is not a side issue. In the virgin birth we see the foundation of the whole gospel. We see the supernatural intervention of a gracious God who brings His Son into the world, uniting Him to human flesh, that He might save us from our sin.

God with Us

Matthew 1:18-25

V. Expositions of Matthew's Gospel

December 21, 1997

For the third time we will look at the announcement of the virgin conception and coming birth of Christ found in Mt 1:18-25. In previous studies we have looked at the impact of the announcement on Joseph and at the virgin birth itself. Now Matthew will tell us directly of its vital connection to our redemption. What is the point of the virgin conception and birth of Christ? Why did His entry into the world happen in this way, as opposed to some other way? This exercise, I trust, will remind us that doctrine is never irrelevant. Some doctrines may be more remote than others. But, ultimately, they all impact upon us in ways that are critical for life and faith.

The Promise of God

Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, (Matthew 1:22)

First, the virgin birth of Christ occurs in order to **fulfill the promise of God** made in Isaiah 7:14. "All this took place," he says, everything from the couple involved (Mary and Joseph) to the timing of the conception (during betrothal), to the announcement of the angel, was in fulfillment of the plan of God. This exceptional conception was not a freak of nature. It was foretold by Isaiah as God spoke through Him. This is important in the first instance because it means that Christ is the promised Messiah. The nation of Israel should not look for some other. He is the one. Again and again Matthew will use this form of words, this fulfillment terminology, to prove that Jesus is the Christ for whom Israel has longed (2:15,17,23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:25; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9). It is important in the second instance because it reminds us that God had a plan and purpose for His people that He announced ahead of time. He did not forsake them. In the midst of the turmoil of the Assyrian threats of the eighth century B.C. God told of His people of a Deliverer who would come and rescue them. That Deliverer, in the fullness of time, was now among them.

So it is that Matthew is reminding us of the faithfulness of God to His Word. God keeps His promises. He can be trusted. He can be relied upon. He promises that He will never abandon His people, and He keeps that promise. As bleak as life sometimes gets, as dark as the future may seem, as hopeless as our lot may be He still says, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you" (Heb 13:15). He spoke those words first to Israel through Moses (Dt 31:6) and He continues to say that to us today (Heb 13:5). The virgin birth heralds the fact that God once again remembers His promise to save His people. "Lo I am with you always," He says to us (Mt 28:20). Our God is a God who loves and cares for His people. So be of good cheer. Rejoice.

This is “glad tidings of great joy!” All is well! God is on His throne and intervening in history on our behalf. He withholds no good thing from us. With Christ He freely gives us all things (Ps 84:11, Rom 8:32).

God with us

The first point does not answer why such a promise should have been made. Granted God keeps His promises. Why did He make this one?

‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, “God with us.”’ (Matthew 1:23)

The second reason for the virgin conception, of a conception which joins the human seed of Mary to the divine seed of the Holy Spirit was that **God might be with us**. It happened that the One born might be both human and divine, the God-Man. He will be “Immanuel,” a transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning “God with us.” Jesus was never called “Immanuel” and that was not his name in the sense that “Jesus” was. It should be understood “in the sense of title or description,” say Carson, as was Solomon’s name “Jedidiah” (“Beloved of Jehovah” - 2 Sa 12:25) (80).

The commentators split hairs over whether Matthew’s meaning is that God is “with us” in sending Jesus, or whether Jesus Himself is God “with us.” The former seems the more natural sense of Isaiah’s original meaning (which could in some sense be fulfilled in Isaiah’s day) though the latter is merely a fuller, richer sense of that meaning. God is with us and for us in sending His Son and literally with us in the person of Jesus. Morris writes, “in Jesus none less than God came right where we are” (31).

Perhaps we can get at the significance of this best by considering the alternatives. What if the angel’s announcement of the birth of the child signaled not that God was “with us” but *against* us? What if all we knew were His confrontive hostility? The broadly accepted truism that “to err is human, to forgive divine” blinds us to the fact that God’s wrath against us is just and His kindness is unobligated. He is not required to show us mercy. “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,” He declares (Rom 9:15; c.f. Ex 33:19). He could with perfect justice condemn and destroy the whole world. You may remember that He did this once, excepting Noah and his family. He need not provide a Deliverer for us any more than He did for the devil and his fallen angels. So, rather than God being “with us,” He might be against us, in our face, pouring His judgments upon us one right after another, now and for eternity. There would be no escape. There would be nowhere to turn. There would be no relief. Life on earth might become like life in hell: the relentless presence of an omnipotent God who is infinitely angry with us. This is why we tell our children that they have one basic decision in life - get on God’s side so that you’ll know He’s on your side. God must be “with” you in life. In competitive athletics one never knows who is going to win or lose. Surprising things happen every year. But God’s side is the winning side. We want to be on His team. Just before the battle of Jericho Joshua was confronted by the angel of the Lord, probably a pre-incarnational visitation by God the Son, who appeared opposite him with a drawn sword. Joshua said,

‘Are you for us or for our adversaries?’ (Joshua 5:13b)

The answer he got was,

‘No, rather I indeed come now as captain of the host of the Lord.’ (Joshua 5:14a)

God answers Joshua’s “either us or them” with a “no.” In other words, God does not join our causes, we join His. We do not create a program and then ask God to bless it. We join His program. In Jesus Christ God is with us. Come to Jesus and know the unfailing favor of God.

Joshua later puts it this way to the children of Israel in the aftermath of their conquest and occupation of Canaan:

‘ . . . choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.’
(Joshua 24:15)

Back to Matthew. Rather than God announcing He is “with us” He might have sent a prophet to announce that God is “against us.” What utter hopelessness and despair would be our lot! No more terrible announcement could ever have been made. Instead we learn that in Christ Jesus God is with us! Don’t you want the favor and blessing of God? Don’t you want to know Him and His goodness? Then come to Jesus. In Christ God is “with us” not against us.

He might also have announced that God is “away from us.” Rather than being “with us,” along side of us, dwelling in our world, sharing our trials and burdens, he might have remained distant, aloof, unmoved, inaccessible in heaven. He might have determined to have nothing to do with us. This is not the same problem we’d face if He were “against us.” But in the end it would be the same. What if He were indifferent? What if He left us in our fallen world, with its perpetual sin-induced problems of hatred, envy, cruelty, crime, war, poverty and hunger? Then what? Then what would we do? What if He didn’t care? What if He left us to our lot and did nothing? What if the prophet announced that God was turning His back on us and would *not lift a finger* to help us overcome the evil, suffering, despair of this world? Remember again, He is not obligated to help us. He could just give us over to our sin and would be perfectly justified in doing so (Romans 1). Instead He announces that this Child is God “with us.” In the God-Man Jesus Christ He is “with us.” He is with us in our sin, our battle with evil, our suffering, our pain, our sorrow. He is not far off. He is “with us” in Christ. He has not remained aloof. He has come near in Christ. Because of the virgin conception of Christ, God Himself is with us in all the tribulations of this world. A great collective sigh of relief ought to be heard all over the world in response to this announcement, if not shouts of joy. God is not “against” us. God is not “away from us.” God is “with us!”

Our Sins

The virgin-conceived Son will be “God with us” to what end? For what purpose? Third, the virgin birth happened that ***God Himself might save us from our sins***. He comes not to merely give us a helping hand, but to deal with that which is at the heart of our problem. Our sin is a problem that finally only God can resolve. The child to be born will be named “Jesus,” and he will be the Savior of His people.

‘And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.’ (Matthew 1:21)

“Jesus” is the Greek version of the Hebrew name “Joshua,” meaning either “Jehovah is salvation,” or “Jehovah saves.” Why will He have this name? “For,” he says, “it is He who will save His people from their sins.” We face the same question with “Jesus” as we deal with “Immanuel.” Does it mean that in Jesus Jehovah saves? Or does it mean that Jesus is Jehovah saving. Once again there is no reason not to understand the angel’s words in their richest sense (see Carson, p. 80). Jesus is Jehovah saving. Again we see why He was born of a virgin, why the seed of Mary and the seed of the Holy Spirit were joined in conceiving the God-Man Jesus Christ. Only God could bear our sins. Only He could live a sinless life. Only He could bear the infinite wrath of God. And only He, as a man, could bear human sin. God is not with us in a vague, undefined sort of way. The Child Himself will be the One through whom the people of God shall be saved from their sins. Thus the angel defines for Joseph the heart of the mission of the Child now in the womb of Mary. He is a special child. He is “of the Holy Spirit.” He is

“God with us.” And what does He come to do? He comes to save. He does not come primarily to teach, though He does teach, and we need his teaching. He does not come primarily to heal, though He does heal and we need healing. He does not come primarily to comfort, though He does comfort and we need comforting. He comes to save us. What does this mean about us? The language of salvation, “Are you saved, brother?,” sounds quaint to us today. But its meaning is rich. It means that we are in a lost condition. Christmas has become so sentimentalized that it never seems appropriate anymore to talk about the purpose of the incarnation. What was Jesus’ mission? Jesus came to save. We are lost. We are wandering. We are headed for destruction. We cannot deliver ourselves. We cannot rescue ourselves. We cannot save ourselves. Back when I was a teenager in Southern California I came closer to death than I ever hope to come again. I found myself in a riptide on a “huge day,” a day of giant waves, double-breaking at Huntington Beach. Normally the most humiliating thing imaginable for a Southern California boy would be to be rescued by a lifeguard. By the time I swam out beyond the first break, treaded water for a while, and then discovered, totally exhausted, that I was in a riptide, I was begging for a lifeguard to save me. I knew I couldn’t get in on my own. This is the assumption of the gospel. Jesus comes to save because we need a Savior. We can’t get this on our own. This is the whole background to the incarnation. This is what you and I must understand if we are to benefit from the incarnation of Christ. We are lost. We are floundering. We are sinking, and we cannot rescue ourselves. We need to get to the point that we know this about ourselves so that we will get over the pride factor and cry out for help.

The specific thing from which we need to be saved is not poverty or ignorance, but sin. What is sin? It is *hamartia*, missing the mark, it is missing the standard set by God. It is breaking His commandments. It is transgressing His law. It is violating His will. It is idolatry, immorality, pride, selfishness, envy, self-righteousness, and greed. Where is this sin from which we need to be delivered? It is in our hearts. Our problem is “within” (Mt 15:15-20; cf. Mk 7). Our problem is that we are lost in our own sin, in bondage to sin, and that sin brings down upon our heads the judgment and curse of God. Sin is both a condition and a record. Consequently He comes to save us from both the guilt and power of sin. This is great news! But ironically this message is not one of the big hits at Christmas time. No one seems to want to hear about sin. Sin is so negative, they say. Such an unhappy theme at such a happy time. Can you imagine the fix we have got ourselves into? On the occasion at which we celebrate the incarnation we don’t want to hear about that which the angel of God himself identifies as the purpose for Christmas! Such is the dominance of sentimentalism at holiday time. The irony of it all is astonishing. But do note that Christian people have not always been so reticent about this theme. Review our favorite cards!

*Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all you nations, rise, join the triumph of the skies;
With th’ angelic host proclaim, “Christ is born in Bethlehem!”*

God and who are reconciled? Sinners!

*Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou are,
Dear Desire of ev’ry nation, joy of ev’ry longing heart.*

Note the “fears and sins” from which we need “release.”

*O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;*

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Cast out our what? Our sins!

*God rest you merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas day,
To save us all from Satan's pow'r when we were gone astray;
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy.*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found, far as, far as the curse is found.*

Good grief! Satan's power, sins sorrow, and curse? On Christmas? This is just a sampling of what our forefathers in the faith celebrated and what is at the heart of Christmas. He saves us from the curse of sin, and we enjoy peace with God, peace in our hearts, and peace in our relationships. He saves us from the power of sin, and so we enjoy the liberty of the children of God. This is good news! This is the gospel! This is Christmas!

THE MAGI

MATTHEW 2:1-12

VI. EXPOSITIONS OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

DECEMBER 28, 1997

The story of the Magi from the east, who were led by a star to the Christ-child is among the most familiar and most beloved of all Bible stories. Yet it provides us with perhaps the classic example of how it is a tendency of human nature to get things slightly wrong. "We three kings of orient are;" they weren't three, they weren't kings; they weren't from the orient as we typically define the orient; and they were not at the manger, but rather arrived in Bethlehem many months later, arriving at a "house," not the inn (v. 10).

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king,
behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem . . . (Matthew 2:1)*

The text says that they were "magi," from which we get our word "magic," were probably members of priestly caste, and astrologers. They were from the "east," probably from Persia, and had traveled five hundred miles to Jerusalem. The English word "behold," no longer communicates the sense of shock that is intended in verse 1. The arrival of the magi from the east could perhaps be compared to the arrival of Martians on our landscape today. This is an extraordinary thing. Magi from the east had come five-hundred miles to worship one who was born "King of the Jews!"

Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him? (Matthew 2:2)

Yet note the contrast between the magi and those whom they encounter in Jerusalem.

And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.
(Matthew 2:3)

The magi with obvious zeal and commitment travel across half of a continent to worship the one who had been born to be king. Herod, the chief priests and scribes and “all Jerusalem” are “troubled.” This contrast is deliberately emphasized and sustained through verse 12. On the one hand there is the zeal, devotion and enthusiasm of these pagan Gentile magi. On the other hand, in Jerusalem they encounter a range of responses from indifference or apathy to hostility. Let us then examine the various responses to the birth of Christ, finding in them perhaps a window into our own souls.

Herod

There are five Herods mentioned in the Bible. There is Herod the Great, mentioned here. Herod Archelaus (son of Herod the Great) Matthew 2:22; Herod the Tetrarch (son of Herod Archelaus) who executed John the Baptist, recorded in Matthew 14; Herod Agrippa (grandson of Herod the Great) who murdered James (Acts 12:1); and Agrippa, son of Herod Agrippa who interviewed Paul in Acts 25-26. Herod grew up among the Jewish people and was familiar with the Jewish religion. His father was an Idumean and his mother an Arabian. The Romans made him King of Judah in 40 B.C. and he is generally thought to have died in 4 B.C. Morris points out that he is an “unscrupulous tyrant” (p. 35) and yet his achievements were such that he earned the epithet “the Great.” He was a great builder whose accomplishments included the erection of the temple in Jerusalem. He may very well have been familiar with the Old Testament. His identification of a “king” with the “Christ” (Messiah) in his question in verse 4 seems to indicate this. When the magi report to him the birth of “the king of the Jews,” verse three tells us that Herod is “troubled.” Herod fears the birth of a rival because he was so hated and despised by the Jewish population he is vulnerable to the claim of a genuine descendant of the royal line of David. In other words he fears a hereditary monarchy. When Herod the Great is troubled the whole city shakes. In verse 4-6 he gathers the facts.

And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; For out of you shall come forth a Ruler, Who will shepherd My people Israel.' "
(Matthew 2:4-6)

He feigns interest in verses 7-9.

Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, 'Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him.' And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. (Matthew 2:7-9)

Not until verse 16 do we learn of his true intentions.

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi. (Matthew 2:16)

Why then is Herod so hostile? Why is he so threatened? Why does he attack so brutally? Because he fears the loss of power. He enjoys royalty. He enjoys the wealth and the comfort

and the prestige of his position. He has more interest in saving his throne than he does in saving his soul. The problem for Herod is Christ. Christ is always the problem for the great ones of the world. Christ represents a higher authority and a higher claim to which he is not eager to submit. As Paul says there are “not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble” who receive the gospel message (1 Cor 1:26). The proud resist Christ because He requires that they submit to Him, and they will not be humbled. The powerful resist Christ because He requires that they be ruled, and they will not repent. That is the great issue for Herod and it is for all of the great ones of the earth. Herod has much to lose. They have much to lose. Christ to them represents the potential of poverty or bondage to His rule or boredom in His kingdom. He is for them the “pale Galilean” who undoubtedly will turn their world to shades of gray. The Hitlers and the Maos and the Stalins have attacked the church, because it represents a force which they cannot control. They are threatened by groups of people who have a higher allegiance than their allegiance to them. That higher allegiance has the potential to deny them what they want. It represents potential rebellion and loss of power. And so they attack. Even lesser ones like you and me can respond with hostility to Christ because he represents for us a loss of control of our own sphere. Husbands are hostile to wives who come to Christ because they have a higher call and a higher allegiance than themselves. Parents are threatened by the loss of their children to Bible studies and prayer meetings and overseas missions. Sheldon Vanauken in his book *Severe Mercy* recounts his own jealousy toward Christ when his wife became a Christian and began more and more to devote herself to Him. Matthew’s account of the birth of Christ begins with this fundamental conflict and challenge. The birth of this Child is the birth of a King. The question he raises is, “Will you submit? Will you be ruled? Will you listen? Will you obey?” Or will you, Herod-like, rebel resist and refuse His Lordship.

The People of Jerusalem

Let’s go back up to verse 3. Matthew says they (the people) also were “troubled.” Why would they be troubled? Why are they not excited? Why are they not thrilled? Why are they not eager to follow the birth of their king? Go back to verse 5. Herod assembles his chief priests and scribes and asks them where the Messiah would be born, and they give the right answer. “In Bethlehem of Judea,” they say, “Or so it has been written by the prophets.” They correctly quote correctly Micah 5:2! But, remarkably, that is where it ends. They don’t look into it. They don’t send observers. They don’t follow up on Herod’s inquiry. They seem to have no interest in the birth of the King. Why? Because the region had endured years of warfare and hardship. Herod had brought peace and the people, from the leaders to the peasants, wanted to maintain that peace. They want to maintain the status quo. They don’t want the trouble that will come if there is a disputed monarchy. They are orthodox. They know the Scriptures. They know the right answers, but spiritually they are apathetic at best. They are able to tell where one should go, but they don’t move a foot in that direction. Where is their spiritual interest? Where is their desire to know? Where is their desire to find out? Why didn’t they not long to go and see? The reality is they fear Herod more than they fear God. They want immediate peace more than they want eternal salvation. Religion has become for them an external, superficial thing. They have a form of godliness, but they deny its power. This is always the danger for those who are religious. There is always the danger for those of us who were brought up in the church that we will be overcome with apathy and indifference. We’re vulnerable to a creeping sort of worldliness and unbelief. We are in danger of settling for rituals and forms and creeds and organizations and programs and in the process of missing Christ Himself. I am reminded of what Francis Schaeffer once said about the American people. He once said that if one can promise the American people personal peace and affluence, they’ll settle for almost anything. This is our danger. We don’t want a religion that is going to threaten the status quo. We don’t want a religion that is going to require change in life and lifestyle. We don’t want to reexamine our personal preferences and practices. We want a religion that will leave us alone. We want a Jesus that will allow us to fit in. The problem is that that Jesus doesn’t exist, and He never has existed. The real Jesus did not come to bring peace but a sword. The real Jesus comes to call us to repentance and discipleship. The real Jesus says “any man would come after me let him deny

himself, take up his cross and follow me.” The real Jesus is a King who makes demands. The real Jesus requires that we repent and submit. This is not the religion that the people of Judea want at this time in their lives. They want to be left alone.

The Magi

Let us go back and contrast this with the magi. They have traveled five hundred miles. They come boldly and ask the question, “Where is He?” and declare their unabashed intentions and come and to “worship Him.” They receive a cool reception throughout, but they won’t be put off by it. When they arrive they are thrilled.

And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. (Matthew 2:10)

Matthew uses four words to describe their response when they found Christ. They “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” It can’t be stated much more strongly than that. They are ecstatic. This is the greatest thing that has ever happened to them. Then they present their gifts.

And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:11)

Do note that they find themselves among commoners. They are in an ordinary home; they are not in a palace. They are not surrounded by royalty, and yet they present gifts and worship. From the three gifts comes the tradition of three magi, though Matthew says nothing about this. All three gifts, the gold, the frankincense and myrrh were valuable commodities in the ancient world. Christians have seen in them symbols of royalty (the gold), of deity, (the incense, normally offered to God), and of suffering and death, (myrrh, used in burial preparation). But again, Matthew says nothing about that. What the Magi certainly do represent is the whole Gentile world, coming and paying homage to Christ. We are to see in them the fulfillment of the promise of Psalm 72.

Let the kings of Tarshish and of the islands bring presents; The kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. And let all kings bow down before him, All nations serve him. (Psalm 72:10,11)

We are to see in them as well a right response to Christ. The magi pursue Christ. Each step of the way they faced hard hearts, apathy and even veiled hatred, not to mention a long, hard road. Yet they pushed on and upon arrival were content to adore Christ and present Him gifts. We should let nothing stand in the way of faith in and service of Christ. Discipleship means facing opposition. It means taking up our cross daily at school and on the job and facing tribulation. It means diligence. It means pursuing Christ. Yet in the end we, like they, will arrive where Jesus is, where there are pleasure forever more and fulness of joy (Ps 16).

They also represent the response of worship. “O come let us adore Him,” the carol repeats over and over again. This is what Christ wants of us. He wants our worship. He wants our adoration. In other words He wants our hearts. He wants us not just to serve Him but to love Him.

Where then does this place us? Are we more like Herod or the people of Jerusalem or the magi? Listen to Alfred Plummer’s poignant summary of the situation.

Pagans, who had nothing to guide them but smatterings of science mingled with much superstition, nevertheless are so kindled with enthusiasm by the signs which God, by means of these imperfect instruments, had granted to them, that they take a long journey and make careful investigation, in order to pay due reverence to the new ruler who has been sent into the world.

But the Jewish hierarchy, with the Pentateuch and Prophets in their hands, are so far from being elated at this report of the fulfillment of types and prophecies, that they do not care so much as to verify it. They are content to be ruled by Herods rather than be roused out of their accustomed modes of life (p. 13-14).

What will it be for us then? Will we be hostile to Christ like Herod? Will we be apathetic and indifferent, resisting rule and change like the people of Jerusalem and their ecclesiastical leadership? Or will we be like the Magi, who with great enthusiasm come and worship the Christ.

Jesus: True Son of God

Matthew 2:13-23

VII. Expositions of Matthew's Gospel

February 1, 1998

When God sent Moses from the flocks of Jethro, his father-in-law, back to shepherd His flocks out of Egypt, He commanded him to say to Pharaoh,

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, 'Israel is My son, My first-born... let my son go, that he may serve me.'" (Exodus 4:22)

Israel, God says, is "My son," even "My first-born." Throughout the Old Testament God is identified as uniquely the Father of Israel and Israel His special son (e.g. Is 63:16; 64:8; Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1). Israel, however, largely failed to fulfill the obligations of sonship, and so fell under the judgments of God, and finally was carried off into captivity.

Among the important themes in Matthew is that of Jesus as the true son of God, as the true Israel. Out of the ashes of Israel's failure arises One who is able to do individually what the nation could not do collectively. He retraces Israel's steps down into Egypt, back out again, is baptized (as was Israel in the Red Sea, says Paul - 1 Cor 10:2), and follows them into the wilderness to be tempted. Nowhere in Matthew's gospel is this clearer than in this text. In a day in which there is considerable confusion about identity and status of the nation of Israel; in which Israel is in the press reports daily; and in which extraordinary claims are made regarding its future, it is helpful to remind ourselves that the true Israel, the true Son of God, is our Lord Jesus Christ. In Him are fulfilled all the promises of God for the nation (2 Cor 1:20).

Persecuted Son

First, Matthew presents Jesus as the persecuted Son of God (vv 13-15).

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.' And he arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt; (Matthew 2:13,14)

Herod is one in a long line of tyrants who hate God and His people, who, if they could, would destroy both. Pharaoh, Nero, Diocletian, Stalin, and Hitler are just a few of the many who have tried. Even as pharaoh lashed out at Israel, God's "first-born," so Herod seeks to destroy the

Christ. He is typical of the great ones of the earth, as we saw last time, who have always hated God and resisted His rule. The Second Psalm tells us

*The kings of the earth take their stand, And the rulers take counsel together
Against the Lord and against His Anointed: 'Let us tear their fetters apart, And
cast away their cords from us!' (Psalm 2:2,3)*

Why do they war against God? Because as we have seen, God is a threat to them. He is a higher power to whom they are accountable. He threatens their authority. He represents “cords” and “fetters.” He restricts their ability to do whatever pleases them whenever they are pleased to do it. In the Christian church there are “not many wise, according to the flesh,” says the Apostle, “not many mighty, not many noble” (1 Cor 1:26). The great ones by and large reject Christ and are openly hostile to His gospel and His people. This must never surprise us (John 15:18-25; 17:14ff; 1 Pt 4:12ff).

Because of this barbaric man, Joseph, Mary and Jesus are warned to leave Bethlehem, fleeing like common criminals in the dark of the night. They flee to Egypt, a land to which many Jews had fled through the history of Israel. It had become “almost a traditional country to which they fled when there was trouble in Israel” said Morris (42). Barclay says that there were many Jews currently living in Egypt. Moreover, every city of Egypt had a colony of Jews, and more than one million lived in Alexandria alone. That the “holy family,” as history calls them, was able to leave so quickly probably indicates their relative poverty, having few preparations to make and few belongings to care for. They stayed in Egypt for an undisclosed period of time, but remaining there,

*until the death of Herod, that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet
might be fulfilled, saying, 'Out of Egypt did I call My Son. (Matthew 2:15)*

They remained in Egypt “until the death of Herod.” This “sojourn in Egypt” is said to fulfill “what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet” (Hosea 11:1) when he said “out of Egypt did I call my son.” This citation illustrates as well as any in Matthew, the sense in which he understood Jesus to fulfill the role of the true Son of God. Please note that when Hosea wrote, he clearly had the Exodus in mind.

*When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son. (Hosea
11:1)*

In what sense can it be said then, that Jesus’ flight to Egypt and call from there to return to Israel is a fulfillment of this passage? Jesus did not fulfill this verse in any *predictive* sense. Hosea was not predicting that the Messiah would repeat the exodus experience. He was not predicting anything about the Messiah at all. “Hosea’s words are not a prediction, but an account of Israel’s origin,” says France (p. 86). Through Hosea God is merely recounting what happened in Egypt centuries before. What Matthew means instead by citing Hosea is that Jesus by His life is recapitulating the history of Israel. He is repeating or redoing that which Israel first did. Why? Because the purposes of God for Israel are fulfilled in Him. “Jesus himself is the locus of the true Israel,” says Carson (93). Like Israel before Him, He must suffer the humiliation of the flight to Egypt. Like Israel, redemption will be accomplished through Him, this time not just for the nation, but for the world. Israel is a type of which Christ is the antitype.

Suffering Son

Second, he is the suffering Son of God (vv 16-18).

*Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very
enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in*

all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi. (Matthew 2:16)

Herod was furious when the magi failed to return to Jerusalem with news of the whereabouts of the child. So he ordered the killing of all the infant boys in Bethlehem two years old and younger. This is an example of the extent to which he and those like him will go to rid the world of a rival. Bethlehem was a relatively small town, so the total number killed would probably have been around 20-30. This utterly self-serving, paranoid and brutal act of Herod's was characteristic for a man whose cruelty was proverbial. He had three of his own sons murdered as well as his wife and her mother. He ordered that upon his death one member of each family in his domains should be killed so that the nation would truly mourn his passing (the order was not carried out). Here, his hatred of God is so great that he orders the murder of these innocent young boys.

Matthew tells us that his violence fulfilled the prophesy of Jeremiah.

Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, 'A voice was heard in Ramah, Weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; And she refused to be comforted, Because they were no more.'
(Matthew 2:17,18)

Jeremiah's prophecy is found in Jer 31:15, and originally applied to either the exile of Israel in 721 B.C. at the hands of the Assyrians, or of Judah in 587 B.C. by the Babylonians. The latter is the more likely. Rama was located six miles north of Jerusalem. Rachel's tomb was in Zelzah in the same vicinity as Rama (1 Sam 10:2). The chief lieutenant of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuzaradan, gathered the captives of Judea at Ramah prior to their deportation to Babylon (Jer 40:1,2). Rachel as the symbolic mother of the nation was portrayed as weeping at the departure of her "children" as they were soon to be hauled off and would be "no more." Matthew applies this prophecy to the slaughter of the innocent. Again we ask, is this predictive prophesy? No, Jeremiah was not foretelling anything about the Messiah or events around the Messiah's coming. He was merely describing the tragedies of his day. How then does the grieving of Bethlehem's mothers "fulfill" Jeremiah's prophesy? As was the case with Hos 11:1, the fulfillment is typological. The exile of Jesus, and the destruction of the infant boys of Bethlehem parallels the exile of the captures and the destruction of countless others at the hands of the Babylonians. Rachel weeps as once again her children are destroyed.

The parallels go further. There is hope hidden in the tragedy recorded in verses 16-18. The primary note in Jeremiah 31 is that of hope. "'There is a hope for future,'" declared the LORD, 'and your children shall return to their own territory,'" he says in the next verses (31:17). Further along in the same chapter the promise of a new covenant is given:

'But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the Lord, 'I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,' declares the Lord, 'for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.' (Jeremiah 31:33,34)

The tears begun in the first exile are now ended with the tears of Bethlehem's mothers as the true Son of God returns from exile to enact a new covenant. He comes to fulfill the hope in Jeremiah 31, of Rachel's children restored, of sins forgiven, of the personal knowledge of God, of a new covenant, of the law of God written on each believer's heart. The relevance of Matthew's citing

of Jeremiah “is not in Ramah or in Rachel,” says R.T. France, “but in breavement as a prelude to blessing” (p. 87).

Thus the two great events of Israel’s history, the exodus and the exile (and return) are relived in the life of Christ. They are seen by us now as typological events, foreshadowing that which Christ would accomplish. He fulfills all that which was promised in the history of Israel. What was promised in the exodus which formed the nation, and in the exile which restored the nation, are now fulfilled in Christ.

Unrecognized Son

Third, Matthew presents Jesus as the unrecognized Son of God.

But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, ‘Arise and take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead.’ And he arose and took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. (Matthew 2:19-21)

Following the death of Herod, his kingdom was divided into three smaller principalities. Judea went to Archelaus, Galilee to Herod Antipas, and the northeast region beyond the Jordan to Phillip. Herod’s death signaled the opportunity for Joseph, Mary and the child to return to Israel. An angel appears again to Joseph and directs him to return.

But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he departed for the regions of Galilee. (Matthew 2:22)

The angel did not reveal to Joseph precisely the location in Israel to which they were to return. Luke 1:26 and 2:4 both say that Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth before going to Bethlehem. It may be that they wanted to settle permanently in Bethlehem. Archelaus, however, was little better than his father. He was “noted for his cruelty even in an age when cruel men were not scarce,” say Morris (48). He ruled over Judea in the place of his father, but the Romans refused him the title king until he proved his worthiness, which he never did. They deposed him in A.D. 6 because of incompetence. Galilee, however, was under the tetrarchy of Herod Antipas from the time of Herod’s death. The “holy family,” would be safer under his rule than under the rule of Archelaus. Matthew says,

and came and resided in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’ (Matthew 2:23)

Nazareth was a small town in Galilee. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament, in the Talmud, in the Midrashim or Josephus. The fulfillment formula normally employed by Matthew is altered by his making the prophets plural and by omitting “saying.” The fact that there is no prophet who mentions Nazareth has long been regarded as problematic for understanding Matthew’s intent. Morris’ explanation, “it appears that Matthew is drawing attention to the thrust of Old Testament prophecy about Christ rather than to any one passage,” seems to express Matthew’s meaning (49). Carson as well notes,

Nazareth was a despised place (John 7:42, 52), even to other Galileans (cf. John 1:46). Here Jesus grew up not as “Jesus the Bethlehemite,” with its Davidic overtones, but as “Jesus the Nazarene,” with all the opprobrium of the sneer. When Christians were referred to in Acts as the “Nazarene sect” (24:5), the expression was meant to hurt. First century Christian readers of Matthew, who had tasted their share of scorn, would have quickly caught Matthew’s point. He is not saying that a particular Old Testament prophet foretold that the Messiah would live in

Nazareth. He is saying that the Old Testament prophets foretold that the Messiah would be despised (cf. Pss 22:6-8, 13; 69:8,20-21; Is 11:1; 49:7; 53:2-3, 8; Dan 9:26).

In this too Jesus was like the nation of Israel. God chose Israel, Moses says, not because it was “more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples” (Dt. 7:7). God did not identify Himself with one of the great empires, but with a small nomadic people. Jesus, in other words, identified Himself with the outcasts from the very beginning. Isaiah prophesied “He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, no appearance that we should be attracted to Him” (Is 53:2). He was a very ordinary-looking person from a very ordinary place. He didn’t come dressed in the robes of royalty. Isaiah says as well, “He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and like from whom men hide their face He was despised and we did not esteem Him” (Isaiah 53:3). Five-sixths of His earthly time on earth was spent with the poor folks in Nazareth. Jesus’ life forever stands as a rebuke to the great ones of the earth and all the pomp and circumstance with which they are so concerned.

Like God’s suffering people, His Suffering Servant is “a man of sorrows acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). From the outset of Matthew’s gospel we know that this royal son of David, of whom he has spoken so clearly in chapters 1 and 2, is a unique kind of King. He is a King unlike other Kings. He is a King who will be called to suffer. He is a King who will be humiliated, despised, and afflicted. He will suffer as Israel suffered, and through His suffering He will be better able to serve His people. “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weakness,” says the writer to the Hebrews. “But One who has been tempted in all things as we are yet without sin.” This is clear from the very beginning. He is the suffering Son of God. “Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:15,16). Again the writer to the Hebrews says,

Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.
(Hebrews 2:17,18)

He has been made like us “in all things.” Consequently, He is “a merciful and faithful high priest,” “tempted in that which He has suffered” and so He is “able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.” Let us draw near to Him by faith, this persecuted, suffering, despised Son of God.

Preparing the Way for the Lord
Matthew 3:1-12
VIII. Expositions of Matthew’s Gospel
February 8, 1998

FOR OVER FOUR HUNDRED YEARS THE PEOPLE of God had not heard the voice of God through His prophets. Following Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets there was “no longer any prophet” (Ps 74:9). Four centuries had passed. Yet the Lord had promised through Malachi that he would send His “messenger” to “clear the way before Me” (3:1). Then suddenly

in Matthew 3, John the Baptist burst on the scene, “full-grown and full-armed,” to use Maclauren’s memorable phrase (Barclay, 36). He is Malachi’s promised messenger (Mk 1:2). He comes to “make ready the way of the Lord.”

John’s mission is a part of the plan of God in history, the *historia salutis* (history of redemption) and is as such never to be repeated. However there is a sense in which the ministry of preparation is repeated every time someone becomes a Christian, and so is a part of the *ordo salutis* as well. The way that one is to prepare for Christ never changes. In other words, even as John called Israel to prepare to meet its King, so also each one of us must prepare to meet our Savior. So it is with both historical and personal interest that we approach our text today.

Preparing for the Lord

First, we are to prepare to receive the Lord.

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet, saying, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!’” (Matthew 3:1-3)

Verse 3 is a direct quotation from Isaiah 40:3. Isaiah prophesied that God’s messenger would come and prepare the way for Christ by clearing a path for Him. His words, of course, are meant spiritually and symbolically. He clears a path through human hearts: lifting up every valley, leveling every mountain, making smooth the rough places and cutting straight paths through obstructing idols and lusts.

Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley. (Isaiah 40:4)

The Messenger comes to call the people to rid their hearts of whatever barriers they have that will keep them from Christ. What keeps people from the Good News? Valleys do! Valleys of moral degradation and lust with which they cannot part; valleys of hopeless dependency and discouragement from which they cannot rise. To such comes the call of the messenger - “be lifted up!” This is both a promise and a command. No matter how degraded and enslaved and in love with sin, you can be lifted up! No matter how low and hopelessly lost you consider yourself to be, you can be lifted up. Surely this is the glory of the gospel; Rahab the harlot, David the adulterer, deceiver and murderer, Peter the traitor, Paul the blasphemer can all be lifted up and forgiven and restored! No valley is so deep that He cannot pull you out. No pit is so dark and dirty that He cannot save you.

What keeps people from the Good News of Jesus Christ? Mountains do! Mountains of pride; mountains of lofty, haughty arrogance which cannot and will not recognize its own rebellion

against God, its own arrogant, hurtful treatment of others, its own need of repentance and forgiveness.

For the great ones of the earth to receive Christ, they must be made low. Those puffed-up with a sense of their own greatness and virtue must be flattened. Hear the gospel say “The heart is deceitful above all else and desperately wicked” (Jer 17:9); “There is none righteous, *no not one*” (Rom 3:10); “You are but dust” (Gen 3:19), “What do you have that you did not receive? (1 Cor 4:7); “apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). If you think you are a fine person with sufficient virtue to commend yourself to God, your mountain of self-confidence and pride must be made low. You must bow before Him and admit your inadequacy and inability to stand before His throne of justice and confess your need of a Savior, if you are ever to benefit by the gospel.

Then there are the twisted, irregular, rough, rugged paths of inconsistency and evasion, and hypocrisy. This differs from the barriers of valley and mountains by its subtleties. This is a life that may be externally, publicly correct, but internally is a lie. This is the life of superficiality; of convenience; of conformity to the will of God when it corresponds with my agenda but deviation whenever it suits my desires. This too is a barrier to receiving the gospel. This too is an obstruction keeping multitudes from the kingdom of God and a saving understanding of the gospel. It must become a “broad valley” or a “plain.” Its twists must be straightened out. Its bumps must be leveled.

The question for us all is this: Is it worth it to continue to sin? Are the mountains of pride and the valleys of sin and degradation and twisted paths of deception and hypocrisy worth it? Do I profit if I should gain even the whole world and yet lose my own soul? Weigh that question carefully. The Bible is clear. I cannot come to Jesus Christ still wedded to my idols and lust. This is not to say that I must “clean up my act” before I come to Christ. These are not preconditions for receiving Christ that I must meet but rather the condition of the heart that is able to receive Him. We’re not talking about a *clean* heart but a *sincere* heart. The path through my heart must be made straight; the mountains must be brought low; the valleys lifted up. Whatever is an obstacle, remove it. Whatever is an inconsistency, correct it. Do you read the Bible without understanding? Do you listen to preaching without profit? Search your heart and ask God to clear a path, revealing to you every barrier, whatever it might be, that you might receive his Son.

The Manner of Preparation

Second, John’s ministry reveals how we are to prepare for Christ.

Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. (Matthew 3:4-6)

“John the Baptist,” the son of Elizabeth and Zacharias, Jesus’ cousin, preaches the message of preparation and a revival breaks out and “all” Judea and Jerusalem came to hear and respond. The people recognize John’s prophetic call and there is great excitement. What does he preach? “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” says Matthew (3:2). “A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” says Mark (1:4). This is the way obstacles of sin are removed and paths made straight. Let’s look at his ministry and message more closely.

1. *They are to deny themselves.* The truly prepared heart has been reconciled to the call to live a life of self-denial. This can be seen in John’s austere *clothing*, the camel’s hair garments and leather belt, recalling the description of Elijah in (2 Kings 1:8; cf. Zech 13:4); his still more austere *diet* of locusts and wild honey; and the un-idyllic desert or wilderness *location*. Matthew writes,

Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. (Matthew 3:4)

John’s whole life is an illustration of his message. For him there are no fine palaces, no fine foods, no comforts and no luxuries (Mt 11:8,9). Fundamental to receiving Christ is this attitude which says “no” to self. The world teaches us to say yes to self; to go ahead, live a little; to indulge your desires, your wants and lusts. John’s lifestyle reminds us that to follow Christ you must “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow” Him (Matt 16:24). Bonhoeffer said, “when Jesus bids a man come, he bids him come and die.” The attitude with which the truly repentant turn from sin is that of complete surrender. No longer do I have right to anything before God. I am completely at His disposal. All I have is completely at His disposal. All I do is ultimately for His glory, whatever the cost may be. The world is looking for this. The cynic says “the last Christian died on the cross.” The secret of the success of the early church, the Protestant Reformers, and the missionaries today is this willingness to leave it all behind in order to obey.

In addition, the truly prepared heart is reconciled to a life of self-effacement. We read in verse 5 that John was a very popular preacher: “all” the people were coming out to him. Yet he says of the one to follow him whose way he prepares, that he is not worthy to perform the task of the lowest slave, not even to “remove His sandals.”

As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matthew 3:11)

He is “mightier than I,” he says. His ministry, he goes on to say, is far greater than mine. I baptized him with water, but “He Himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

The truly prepared heart is humble. It is not seeking self glory, honor or credit. It was refreshing for me, when in Scotland to find such humility amongst its ministers, of which Sinclair Ferguson was exemplary. There is a man of consummate ability and achievement. Yet, and unlike so

many American ministers, he never draws attention to himself. The truly prepared heart is willing to take the back seat that Christ might have the front seat, and the glory. Oh that in this proud, boastful age in which we live that Christians might be known for their humility

2. They are called to “*confess*” their sins (3:6). The word used in Greek is *homolegeo*, “to say the same thing.” In Mark’s gospel it is an intensive compound, adding the prefix *ex*, meaning “out” (loud). Together they join the two elements necessary in true confession. The first is intellectual agreement; the second is heartfelt conviction, sincerity, even sorrow. Thus one would “cry out” in agreement, “from the heart,” that indeed I am a sinner and that it is my intention to give up all known sin. “Sin” (*hamartia*) means to “miss that mark” of God’s standard or law. Thus to confess sin is to cry out in agreement with God concerning the wrongfulness of my behavior.

3. They are called to “*repent*” (3:2). This Greek word literally means to “change the mind” and hence to change the person (*metanoia*). Repentance takes confession beyond the mind and emotions to the will: there must be a change of behavior. John says to his listeners,

Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance. (Matthew 3:8)

The parallel in Luke elaborates what John had in mind. If you have an abundance, you must share; if you have stolen, you must return the item; if you have acted unjustly, you must not do so any longer (Luke 3:10-14). Repentance means decisive change in life.

4. They are called to the wilderness to be “*baptized*” (3:6). Baptism is a symbol of faith, repentance, and cleansing. John’s contemporaries were familiar with baptism because Gentile proselytes to Judaism were baptized. It was also practiced by some Jewish sects. To submit to it requires that one publicly humbled oneself, confess sin, and receive the cleansing waters as they are poured out upon them.

The prophet Isaiah described our spiritual need: the obstacles in our hearts must be removed. John’s message describes the method of removal: through confession of sin and repentance, and public declaration of such through baptism. To receive Jesus Christ as Savior, you must repent. The barrier of sin can be removed by repentance. John’s meaning is further illustrated by the encounter of verses 7-10.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ (Matthew 3:7)

The “Pharisees” were a strict sect within Judaism, which followed a very detailed list of rules which were designed to prevent violations of the commands of God. The Sadducees were the priestly party, whose name was probably derived from Zaddok, high priest under Solomon (1 Kg 1:8; 2:35). They were often bitter enemies, and when listed together with a single article (cf.

16:1,6,11,12) probably represent the leading Jews, the leadership of the nation, united in opposition to Christ (22:34). At their approach John immediately perceives hypocrisy, the hypocrisy of pretending to be ready for the Messiah when they show no signs of repentance. He calls them a “brood of vipers,” the offspring of snakes. “Who warned you,” that is, who suggested to you that you could escape? You can’t, not without repentance. Do you wish to be saved?

Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance. (Matthew 3:8)

As we’ve seen, repentance means true change in heart and conduct. It means “fruit,” not piles of good works and not a superficial modification of behavior, but real change of conduct and attitude. This can be contrasted with those who think that they are ready for Christ *just as they are* (without faith, without change, without repentance), merely because of their ancestry.

and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ' We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. (Matthew 3:9)

Physical descent without repentance means nothing. God can turn rocks into sons of Abraham. In fact this kind of presumption invites judgment, as John tells them.

And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:10)

Judgment has already begun (in the ministries of John and Jesus). The “axe is already laid at the root.” That the woodsman is swinging at the roots indicates that totality of judgment. Not even a stump will be left.

Does this message of judgment sound like a strange gospel to you? It shouldn’t. Judgment goes hand in hand with gospel. Indeed without judgment the gospel is unnecessary. The gospel is *incomprehensible* without judgment. It is the reality of judgment that the gospel addresses. It is this judgment that the gospel enables us to escape. And it is this judgment that requires our repentance.

John’s Message and Jesus

Someone might say, where is Jesus’ message of grace in all of this? This is not the Jesus I know. John would beg to differ. John’s ministry of baptism with water merely foreshadows and anticipates Jesus ministry of baptism with “the Holy Spirit and fire,” fire here probably emphasizing the cleansing, purifying work of the Holy Spirit. Further, John says of Jesus,

And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:12)

The “winnowing fork” was used to pitch the wheat stalks into the air. A process which separated the wheat and the chaff. The “threshing floor” is that place where the separating took place. That it will be “thoroughly” cleaned indicates that the process of separating true from false believer will be thorough and complete. The “wheat,” his people, will be placed safely in His care, in His “barns,” while the chaff, the hypocrites, will be burned with “unquenchable fire.” A fire that will never end. There is no gap between the message of John and that of Jesus. When Jesus preaches He says just as John did,

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (Matthew 4:17b)

Ask yourself, are there obstacles or barriers to Christ in our hearts? Are there valleys or mountains, or rough, twisted paths? I tremble to think that there must be those here today who have identified themselves as Christians but never repented of their sins. So many are “Christians” but have no heart for God, no love for His Word, no care for the lost, no zeal for His wisdom. They have mountains of pride, valleys of degradation, or twisted paths of hypocrisy. They warm their pews (when they come) largely indifferent to the things of God, yet confident of their eternal safety. This is sheer and utter folly! You must confess your sins. You must repent. You will be forever lukewarm to the Lord Jesus Christ and separate from Him if you do not identify your sins and repent and change your ways! The barriers must be removed before Christ can be received and it is only through repentance that they are removed.

We close with this warning. The people came to John in mass. There were great crowds and great notoriety, excitement and expectation. But all the excitement did not a revival make. For all activity, the obstacles were not removed. The way was not prepared. Jesus said,

He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for awhile in his light. (John 5:35)

Ultimately John was rejected, as was the One whose way he prepared.

What about us? Will we make good this preparatory message? It is good to see the crowds and life in the church. But unless by humble repentance the obstacles are removed from our hearts, it will all be for naught. May God make us such! May we cut straight paths in our hearts, lifting up every valley and making low each mountain.

The Beloved Son
Matthew 3:13-17
IX. Expositions of Matthew's Gospel
February 15, 1998

WE SAW LAST TIME THAT JOHN THE BAPTIST came in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy to prepare the way for Jesus. There are obstacles in the human heart which bar His way. Some have *valleys* of sin and moral degradation which will not be relinquished. Others are plagued by *mountains* of pride and self-sufficiency which will not admit need; still others construct twisted paths of hypocrisy and self-deception which blind them of their true condition. This was true then and it is true now. John by word and deed continues to call us to repentance and self-surrender and reminds us that an unwillingness to let go of pet-sins, or an unwillingness to humble ourselves and admit our inadequacy and need of a Savior constitute damning barriers to salvation. We cannot receive Christ and be saved if we will not repent! I have argued this point so many times with so many people and in so many places and yet the confusion at this point still astonishes me. The Bible is not ambiguous about this - no one receives Christ while still clinging stubbornly to their idols and lusts. You must repent!

Suddenly in verse 13, the Promised One appears in the wilderness in order to meet with John the Baptist (3:1), and in rapid succession, He is baptized and then tempted. The “wilderness” theme is strong in Matthew and helps unlock the heart of the good news for us. What comes to mind when you think of the “wilderness”? If one has some knowledge of the Scripture one ought to think of the children of Israel wandering for 40 years, as punishment for their sins. The wilderness is the refiners fire. It is the place where God purifies his people. The call to the wilderness is a call to be subject to the disciplining hand of God. It is a call to repentance and purity, baptism being an exclamation point to the whole process.

When Jesus goes to the wilderness, he does so as a representative of the people of God. He is the one true Israelite who subjects himself to the disciplining, purging, purposes of God in the wilderness. He is identifying with His people, first in their guilt through baptism, then in their struggle against sin in His temptation.

Why then is Jesus baptized? To put it simply, in order to inaugurate His public ministry. Jesus is now 30 years old (Luke 3:23). He has been silent, for the most part, these 30 years. He has been patiently waiting, working as a carpenter in his father's business. But *now* is the time. The time to act has arrived. So he goes out to the wilderness and submits to baptism, and in so doing sketches out the meaning of his baptism.

Solidarity with John

First, Jesus was baptized in order to give John's ministry the stamp of His approval.

Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. (Matthew 3:13)

Some commentators like to imagine a division between Jesus and John. They see John as a hard, judgmental, doomsday preacher, not unlike the comics page character with long hair, a beard, dressed in robes and carrying a sign reading “REPENT”! Then there is Jesus. He comes with a different message. One might imagine the Sunday School Quarterly scene, with butterflies, lambs and fawns, children on his lap and a kindly look. His message is love, and warmth, and gentleness. The harshness in John gives way to the graciousness in Jesus.

By submitting to John’s baptism, Jesus is identifying Himself as One whose way John was preparing. Jesus signals His approval of and agreement with John’s message. Don’t allow yourself to regard John as a borderline quack whose message was harsh at best and unintelligible at worst. John’s message is the message of the Bible and the message on Jesus’ lips when he inaugurates His preaching ministry in 4:17.

Solidarity with Sinners

Second, Jesus was baptized in order to identify with us in our guilt. What is the meaning of baptism? Water, like fire, is an instrument of God’s judgement which purifies or cleanses as it destroys. God used water to destroy the world in the day of Noah and to destroy the Egyptians at the time of Moses (see also Psalms 69 & 46). Both of these are called baptisms in the New Testament. Thus the children of Israel were “baptized into Moses” by the judgment waters of the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:2). Likewise, the judgement waters of the deluge through which the family of Noah passed “correspond” to baptism, says Peter (1 Peter 3:21).

Thus baptism is a symbolic water judgement which like the real thing, cleanses or purifies as it destroys. Baptism symbolically judges and washes away our sins. For those who truly repent, baptism is accepted by God in exchange for the real. When I submit to the sacrament of baptism, its waters represent the judgment of God upon sin which has been averted through repentance and faith in Christ and now received only symbolically.

Why would Jesus be baptized “in water for repentance” (3:11)? Certainly not for Himself. The Sinless One had no sin to confess and no judgement to avert. John recognizes this at least at some level. In John’s Gospel he responds to his first sight of Jesus by saying,

‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1:29b)

We read here,

But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me? (Matthew 3:14)

This is another beautiful example of John's humility. John immediately recognized his inferiority to Jesus and unworthiness to baptize him. "I have need to be baptized by you," not you by me. So he "tried to prevent Him" from being baptized. He tried to stop Him. He couldn't bear to have Jesus come to him for baptism. He felt hypocritical, implying as it seemed to him, that he was morally superior to the One whom he was baptizing. He felt he couldn't do it.

But Jesus says,

But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him. (Matthew 3:15)

"Permit it at this time," He says. Let it take place. It will be okay for "now" (*arti*), or "at this time." Why? So that they might "fulfill all righteousness." This phrase has stirred up considerable debate among the commentators. "Fulfill" usually in Matthew means fulfill Old Testament prophecy. If that is the meaning here, how would this be so? What Old Testament prophecy?

Let us notice what Jesus is doing. He might have indicated solidarity with John by going straight to the "speaker's platform" and joined him in denouncing sin and calling sinners to repentance. Instead he stands among the sinners and joins them in submitting to baptism. He is identifying Himself with them and their need. What prophecy is fulfilled? That God's righteous servant would be "numbered with the transgressors" (Is 53:11,12). He is standing there with us, on the side of sinners.

But He is also standing there not only *with* us but *for* us. He was baptized as our substitute, symbolically receiving the judgment of God on our behalf. It is as though baptism were a signpost, pointing to the cross and the actual judgment which he will bear on our behalf, which His baptism now anticipates and symbolizes. Remember Jesus later will speak of His death as a baptism:

I have a baptism to undergo and how distressed I am until it is accomplished.
(Luke 12:50)

Likewise he asks:

Are you able to...be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? (Mark 10:38)

Jesus' baptism with water directs us to the heart of the gospel, to the cross, when once again, He will stand in our place, sinless, and receive the judgment of God. Only then, it will be in fact rather than in symbol.

Through His baptism Jesus is saying that He is *with* us and *for* us. He identifies *with* us in our sin, not standing aloof, distant, rejecting us. He gets His hands dirty, even becoming sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). He stands *for* us, bearing our sin on the cross, taking the punishment that we deserve. He is not *for* us in a “stand by your man” kind of way, that shrugs off sin, concedes that “boys will be boys,” and loves us anyway. No, His baptism underscores the certainty and aptness of God’s judgment upon sin. God does not wink at sin. He takes it with infinite seriousness and pours out upon it infinite wrath. Jesus is signaling to all His willingness to take our deserved punishment.

As you watch the judgment waters fall upon Him, watch Him stand there in your place and symbolically now, and actually later, receive the full fury of God’s wrath for you, will you have him, or will you stand alone?

Solidarity with Israel

Third, Jesus was baptized in order to underscore his identity as the true Israel and true Son.

And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him. (Matthew 3:16)

Thus far Jesus has repeated Israel’s sojourn in Egypt and the exodus from Egypt. In chapter 4 He will repeat Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness by his own 40 days in the wilderness. The baptism corresponds to Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea. As we’ve noted, Paul says that Israel was “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:1,2). Israel was baptized, so now it the true Israel baptized.

Further, the dove is sometimes a symbol of Israel in the Old Testament (e.g. Hos 7:11). If this metaphor is being drawn upon, then, as Morris points out, “Jesus is seen as the true, ideal Israelite when he receives the Spirit of God at the threshold of his public ministry” (Morris, 67). But the primary meaning of the descent of the dove is to be understood in connection with the words spoken from heaven. Jesus is the true Son, the “beloved son.” Matthew records for us,

and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

We’ve not told how Jesus learned of His identity and mission. Was it always obvious to Him? Did He gradually realize who He was and what He was to do through meditation on the Scripture? We don’t know. We do know that He was truly human so as He grew up He went through the normal process of “increasing in wisdom” (Lk 2:40). His divine omniscience did not normally flood His human consciousness with exhaustive knowledge. He had to learn as we do. He came to His baptism with an awareness of a unique relationship with the Father, which He had at least since He was a boy of twelve going about His “Father’s business” (Lk 2:41-52). But

it could very well be that what He had pieced together up to this point about His identity and mission is now verified.

The voice of His Father confirms Jesus' identity and mission, quoting first Psalm 2, "This is my beloved Son," a Psalm of enthronement and Kingship, and then Isaiah 42:1, "In whom I am well pleased," a song of the Suffering Servant. As we have seen in previous studies, Israel was God's son (Exodus 4:22, Hosea 1:1, Jeremiah 2:2). But Israel failed. Now Jesus comes as the unique, divine Son of God through whom God's redemptive purposes will be fulfilled. His Father is saying "yes" to exaltation (Psalm 2) through vicarious suffering (Is 42). God is saying "yes" to substitutionary judgement. This is "pleasing" to Him. If Jesus ever doubted the path He was to trod, He received clarification and confirmation at the very outset of His ministry. Though He was the Messianic King (Mt 2:1-11) and the true Son of God, yet He was also the suffering servant who was to die on behalf of His people.

Perhaps you have on occasion wondered if God would accept you. Perhaps you have felt He has not accepted you now and never will. You have felt you are not good enough for heaven. What can we say about this? Your instincts are correct. No, God will not accept you. But He has accepted Jesus Christ. He is the "beloved." With Him he is "well pleased." As we receive Him we become "beloved" in Him (Eph 1:6) and God becomes as "well pleased" with us as His is with Him.

There is the Savior. He is baptized for you. He has identified with us in our sinfulness. He has taken our sin upon Himself and been crucified "as a ransom for many." Will you not admit your need of a substitute to save you? Will you not come to Him?

The Temptation of Jesus
Matthew 4:1-11
X. - XIII. Expositions of Matthew's Gospel
February 22 - March 22, 1998

THE NATION OF ISRAEL WAS "LED" BY GOD in the wilderness for forty years so that He might "humble" and "test" and reveal what was in their hearts. He tested you, Moses said, so that He might determine "whether you would keep His commandments or not" (Dt 8:2). He even let them go hungry, and then fed them manna, that they might learn the lesson that,

man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:3b)

In the same way Jesus is led by God into the wilderness to be tested by hunger for forty days, paralleling Israel's forty years. Once again He is retracing Israel's steps and fulfilling Israel's

calling. As we all see, with each temptation Jesus cites Scripture that has reference “to the temptations that confronted Israel in the wilderness,” Morris notes (70). “In Jesus’ ‘temptations’ God clearly purposed to test him just as Israel was tested, and Jesus’ responses prove that he understood,” says Carson (112). Both sons were tested (Israel and Jesus) “to prove their obedience and loyalty in preparation for their appointed work. The one ‘son’ failed but pointed to the ‘Son’ who would never fail,” Carson continues (112). According to Morris the overall message of the temptations is, “where Israel failed in the wilderness Jesus succeeded in the wilderness” (70). The temptations “legitimized Jesus as God’s true Son,” adds Carson (112).

The purpose of the temptations coming at this, the opening stage of his ministry, is to answer the question, “what does it mean to be the Son of God?” God has just said, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” What does that mean? What will He do? How will He use His powers? How will He conduct His ministry? What means will He employ to usher in His kingdom? Each temptation and response demonstrates that His power is to be exercised only in support of the appointed ends for which He has come. He comes not to be served, but to serve, and uses His power, not to serve Himself, but to serve others.

Generally Considered

We will look now at the temptations in general and then go on to examine each temptation in particular.

We note first that it was God’s will that He be tempted by the devil. We read,

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
(Matthew 4:1)*

Jesus was “led up,” probably indicating movement from the Jordan River to the wilderness of the mountainous area to the west (rather than the wilderness that adjoins the Jordan). Who led Him? He was “led up *by the Spirit*.” For what reason was He led? He was led “to be tempted by the devil.” The language of Matthew indicates purpose. It was God’s plan, intention and purpose that Jesus should confront the devil’s temptations in the wilderness.

What are we to make of this? James says that God doesn’t tempt anyone (Jas 1:13). The word for temptation has a range of meaning that includes both “test” and “tempt.” God Himself does not “tempt,” but He does “test” in order to prove, confirm, and strengthen His people in their faith (cf. Dt 8). The devil, however, “tempts” in order to lead astray and destroy. God at times uses the devil to forward His own purposes. In a given situation God may test a person even as the devil tempts. Indeed He may use the devil’s temptations in order to test.

Likewise we too are tested and tried and tempted according to the plan, intent, or purpose of God. We never reach a stage when we no longer face trials. We never mature beyond temptation. We, like Jesus, will face them as long as we live. And we will face them not

because of accidents or fate. We will face them by the will of God. Why? Because He works His good purposes for us through them. The Apostle Paul says that we

also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope. (Romans 5:3b-4)

Similarly James writes,

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

It helps, it seems to me, to know that my trials and temptations come to me by the plan of God and are, in a sense, normal. When I face a test or trial and resist evil and do what is right I am strengthened and become a better person. By resisting fear I become courageous, by resisting sensual temptation I become irreproachable, by resisting the temptation to steal or cheat I become a person of integrity. This is true even as the opposite is the case. By succumbing to evil I become evil. By indulging my fear or my flesh I become a coward or an immoral person or a scoundrel. We become what we do. It is the same in life as is in the weight room. Struggle, tests, and pain make us stronger.

What about the devil? What are we to make of him? Many people do not believe on a personal focal point of evil. For them evil is always an idea, or a force, or “the dark side of the force,” but never a person. For many the idea of a personal, supernatural manifestation of evil is either a quaint but foolish belief dating back to the Middle Ages or little red guy with horns, a pointed tail, and a pitch fork. However in the wilderness Jesus confronts one with a voice, and a mind, and an agenda and who is called “devil” (*diaballo* = to slander, accuse), “tempter” in verse 3 and “Satan” (*satana* = adversary) in verse 10. He is the enemy of Jesus and the enemy of our souls. He is no joke. He is a thinking, feeling, willing supernatural being. He is a rebel against God and responsible for incalculable evil and suffering, beginning with the fall and extending right on to the end of history. Whenever you see human tears, behind them stands the devil. He is a brute, a beast. It is a horrible mistake to treat the devil and the demonic as a joke, or as an object of fascination. One should not toy with so-called spiritists, seances, Ouija boards, witches, warlocks, haunted houses, horoscopes or anything else involving the powers of the darkness. The devil and his minions are exceedingly dangerous. Yet Jesus deliberately goes out to wage war with him. Jesus is meeting a dangerous foe in moral combat, one with which we must deal with great seriousness and distance. Yet, the Spirit drives Him to battle. This skirmish is a foretaste of His coming victory over the Satanic over the course of His ministry culminating at the cross. We see at the very beginning of His ministry his aim: to conquer the devil and his work.

This preliminary battle reminds us that Jesus has come to “bind” the strong man and spoil his goods (Mt 12:29). He came to destroy the works of the devil (1 Jn 3:8). He has “disarmed” the evil powers and “triumphed” over them (Col 2:15). We no longer live in constant dread of the Evil One. When resisted, he flees (James 4)! And one day it is all going to come to an end. All the mess, all the pain, all the horrors, all the suffering—it all shall cease, and he shall be cast into the lake of fire forever and ever.

Second, the temptations follow a moment of personal triumph. Jesus has just experienced at His baptism the exhilaration of seeing the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descending as a dove, and hearing the Father’s voice confirm His identity and ministry (3:16,17). From that exalted moment he passes immediately to the horrors and deprivations of the wilderness and the devil’s attacks. This too seems to be a pattern in Scripture. For example, Elijah moves rapidly from the great victory over the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel to a day’s flight into the wilderness (again!), where he reaches such depths of despondency that he cries out,

It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers. (1 Kings 19:4b)

Similarly Paul is “caught up into Paradise” and hears “inexpressible words which a man is not permitted to speak” (2 Cor 12:4). Yet he writes,

And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me-- to keep me from exalting myself! (2 Corinthians 12:7)

For Moses, the parting of the Red Sea was followed by the grumbling of the people. Sinai was followed by the golden calf (Ex 15:22ff; 32:1ff). The conversion of Nineveh is followed by the despair of Jonah (Jonah 4:3ff). This often seems to be the case. Very often we will find ourselves severely tested by temptations, by pride, by despondency, by one form of sin or another, following great moments of spiritual triumph. As Calvin points out, “we do not read of His being tempted, when He was running His own life at home, but when He had to enter on the career of the Redeemer” (I. 135). It is often when we are doing some good that the devil’s disruptions come. Several of the lowest points of my life followed fast on the heels of the greatest moments of personal affirmation and success. When we are doing good, when we are bearing fruit, when we are seeing success, then the devil strikes with temptations to indulge our pride, our lusts, our despondency. This is something to recognize and learn from. Why does he attack then? We don’t know but we could venture to guess. Perhaps at such times our guard is down and we are vulnerable. Perhaps we are more susceptible to the temptations of pride. Perhaps in the experimental euphoria of triumph we are more open to sensual euphoria, to being swept along to fleshly indulgence.

I think as well that the devil delights at robbing us of our joy. He can't bear to see happy Christians. So whenever we have something to celebrate, he attacks. There were several years when this sort of thing happened so often that I began to flinch whenever a baby was born or a holiday rolled around. It became absolutely predictable - every occasion of great joy was accompanied by an eruption of one sort or another. He can't bear to see happy Christians or happy churches. This is the devil's way. Just when we are achieving most for the Kingdom of God He brings dissension, division, discouragement, and the opportunity to throw it all away.

Third, the temptations tend to fall in the area of one's peculiar gifts and calling. Most of us could not be tempted to turn stones into bread. We don't have that capacity. It wouldn't be an issue for us. Then in the second temptation Jesus' extraordinary dependence upon and faith in the Father is turned against him as he is challenged to do the irresponsible and trust God for the outcome. The third temptation tempts Jesus to bypass the cross in receiving His crown. His unique calling to rule the world is attacked. In each case Jesus is tempted in the areas of his strengths, as the devil seeks to turn strength into weaknesses. The devil's aim is to get Jesus to use his gifts for His own purposes, and undermine the Father's in the process. This is typically his tactic. So it is that he tempts those with charm to use their charm to "get away with anything." He tempts those with a gift with words to use that gift to talk their way in and out of inappropriate situations. Those who are sensitive are tempted with despondency. Those who are attractive are tempted to rely on their appearance, and relate to people superficially. Those who are rich are tempted to rely on their riches. Our strengths are our weaknesses. The devil turns people of strong convictions into fanatics, the moderate into compromisers, the talkative into gossips, the quiet into snobs, and so on. So Jesus is being tempted to advance His kingdom by inappropriate use of His power or by use of inappropriate means. He is attempting, as is his pattern, to bring evil from good, even as God constantly demonstrates His goodness and sovereignty by bringing good from evil.

The only way that we know about this incident is that Jesus told the disciples. There were no other witnesses. Why did He tell them about it? So that we would know that He was more than a match for the Evil One. The doom of the devil is certain. But also so that we'd know of the schemes and tactics of the devil. As Paul says,

Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:11,12)

Peter warns us to be of "sober spirit" and to "be on the alert." Why?

Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

“We are not ignorant of his schemes,” Paul says of Satan’s attempts to take advantage of Christians (2 Cor 2:11). Likewise let us learn of his schemes, that we may be able to stand, knowing that his doom is sure.

The First Temptation

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
(Matthew 4:1)

The temptation of Jesus was no accident. He was led “by the Spirit” into the wilderness in order “to be tempted by the devil.” It was the intention, the plan, the purpose of God that He should be tempted. Why? Because He was growing in “wisdom and stature” (Lk 2:52). He was getting wiser and stronger. Having received the Father’s confirmation of His identity (“This is my beloved Son,” from Psalm 2) and mission (“in whom I am well pleased,” from the song of the suffering servant in Isaiah 42), He was then to be led out to do battle with the devil so that he might learn the nature of His Sonship. Yes He is the Son of God. But does that mean that He can use his powers to serve His own purposes? Can he recklessly rely on the protection of the Father? Can He take His own route to enthronement? These temptations force Jesus to face these questions, to ponder and reflect, and formulate an answer in light of the nature of His call. Would it be right to turn stones into bread? Or to leap from the pinnacle of the temple? Or to bypass the cross in receiving the crown? Why or why not? Amazingly, not even for Jesus do the ends justify the means. The ends will determine the means, requiring some and excluding others. This is a lesson for the church to ponder. Because a thing *can* be done, and may even produce positive results, does not mean that is *ought* to be done. There are methods that may be employed that may fill a church that ought not to be employed because like turning stones into bread they are fundamentally inconsistent with the nature of the gospel. Through these tests Jesus’ own understanding of His mission is deepened, and His commitment to it is strengthened. As we saw last time, through His experience we will see as well more of the tactics of the devil and be better able to resist his schemes.

First, Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread.

And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.
(Matthew 4:2)

Fasting is commended to us in Scripture as a thing to do when time needs to be devoted to serious thought and prayer. Only one fast was commanded in the Old Testament, for the Day of Atonement, but it was common in New Testament times. It was not unusual for the devoted to fast twice every week. Jesus gives instruction regarding fasting, and speaks of the reward from the Father that accompanies it (Mt 6:16-18).

Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights on Mt. Sinai at the giving of the Law (Ex 34:28). Elijah did the same on Mt. Sinai (Horeb) following his flight from Jezebel (1 Kg 19:8). But the more obvious parallel, as we noted last time, is with Israel’s forty years of wilderness wandering,

as Jesus' responses will make plain. Each response of Jesus is a Biblical citation that is drawn from that period (e.g. Dt 8:2,3; Dt 6:16; Dt 6:13).

And the tempter came and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.' (Matthew 4:3)

Jesus is a real man who experienced real hunger. He knows what it is to suffer bodily deprivations, for one's appetites to go unmet. The "tempter" tempts with a simple and almost harmless question. "If you are the Son of God," he says, suggesting that there may be some doubt about the claim (Morris, 73), then "command that these stones become bread." 'If you are the Son of God, this should not be a difficult thing to do,' he implies. 'Nor should it be a harmful thing to do. After all, you are hungry, and you have the power to do this. So why not?' he is asking. Notice, the temptation is not to become a glutton, as the medieval theologians said. The devil is more subtle than that, and more insidious. He merely suggests that he provide bread, not caviar, to meet a legitimate need, not to gorge. What could be wrong with that? The implication, however, is that God has not provided for him, so he must look out for himself. *This is the first aspect of this temptation. You must take things into your own hands.* God cannot be trusted to provide for you using ordinary means. You must use your miraculous power to provide bread for yourself. Satan is inviting Jesus to use his power for His own ends and purposes, apart from the will and purpose of God. This is not unlike the temptation faced by the single person who after years of waiting for God to provide a Christian mate falls for a charming unbeliever, and shrugs, "God did not provide." The same is faced by the businessman whose business has failed for years to adequately provide for his family who succumbs to the temptation to use dishonest or unlawful means to forward his profits. "God did not honor my honest business, and so I had cheat or starve!" Surely one can bend the rules to meet basic needs. "You gotta live," after all. The same is faced by the unhappy married person who is tempted to divorce his or her spouse without grounds, because, as is often rationalized, God doesn't want me to be miserable. And here is prince/princess charming who can make me happy. Religion is fine, one might say, but one has to live in the real world.

The second aspect of this temptation is this: *to forget that God is the source, the only source, of every true blessing.* There is no blessing, no happiness, no satisfaction apart from Him.

But He answered and said, 'It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.' (Matthew 4:4)

Jesus' answer is a direct quote from Deut 8:2,3. To there we must turn if we are truly to understand the meaning of Jesus' citation. Moses said,

And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not

know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:2,3)

In Deuteronomy Moses is explaining the lesson of God's provision of manna for the people of God in the wilderness. He deprived them of bread and fed them manna "that He might make (them) understand" the lesson that "man does not live by bread alone." When there was no bread God still met their need through other means. From this they were to learn that God, not bread, meets man's needs. God satisfies His people, not bread. The bread which they craved and demanded, has no inherent power to nourish. So God provided not bread, but manna, which they knew nothing about, and nourished them through it so that they would learn that man does not live by bread alone but by the word of God. In other words, God is one who can be trusted. He provides at all times and so can be relied upon at any time. Whether He provides through the ordinary means of bread, or through the extraordinary means of manna, or through hidden means, He at all times is the source of our good. Bread does not nourish us, God does. When there is no bread, He will still nourish us, though through other means. Calvin writes,

When there was no bread to hand, he records that Manna was an exceptional provision for the people, that by this sign, there might be affirmed to every age, that the life of man is not confined to bread but depends upon the command and pleasure of God... Though it is bread that feeds us, we are not right to attribute the life we receive to bread in itself, but to the hidden grace which God breathes into the bread, that we may be fed (I, p. 138).

How is Jesus to respond to his physical hunger? He is to depend on His Father to nourish Him through ordinary means or extraordinary means, but not use his powers for unintended reasons. His thinking would have been something like this - "I am hungry. It is proposed that I turn these stones into bread in order to meet that hunger? Would that be the right thing to do? Well, for what purposes do I have such powers? Am I to use them whenever I please? Are they to be used to meet my own private needs? No. My mission is to suffer for sinners. My use of supernatural power must be consistent with that purpose. This occasion would not be. So I must trust God to satisfy my hunger through ordinary means. Even if no ordinary means are available, I still must trust Him because, after all, it is a blessing of God, not bread, that nourishes the body. He may nourish my body through secret means, directly, or even sending manna if necessary."

Similarly the single person must say, man does not live by human companionship alone. There are legitimate steps that one can take to find a mate. But God can meet our needs through secret means. It is His blessing, not marriage, that satisfies our souls. The businessman must say, man does not live by profits alone. By all means use every legitimate avenue at your disposal to prosper. But realize that wealth, and the benefits of wealth, come through the blessing of God. One can have wealth and still be miserable. On the other hand the blessing of God can transform the humblest of households into a palace of Christian peace and joy, even in the midst of severe deprivations.

The world wants to say that bread is all you need. Just meet my physical needs. Just feed my stomach, feed my lust, make me comfortable, stimulate my senses, and notice me. Real life, they say, consists of rich food, vast quantities of food, sensual pleasures, luxurious homes, clothes, and cars, exotic vacations, constant entertainment, and fame. But the fact is none of this, nothing in all of the earth, has any inherent ability to satisfy the body or soul. As the preacher in Ecclesiastes says, “all is vanity and striving after the wind” (Ecc 2:11). “Nothing tastes,” Marie Antoinette finally said. It has no power to satisfy, or nourish, or fulfill because finally it is only the blessing of God that satisfies, and He extends and withholds that blessing at His will. Bread nourishes only at the command of God.

Man’s attempt to declare independence from God is foolhardy for two reasons. First the air that he breathes and the food that he eats only benefit him because at every moment God commands that it should. Second, he experiences at point after point the withdrawal of that blessing. Sure the air still satisfies his need for oxygen and bread still provides physical nourishment. The rain still falls and the sun still shines on the just and the unjust (Mt 5:45). God is good to all. But He does withdraw the satisfaction that we get from the world apart from Him. We feed our flesh like animals, but our souls are famished. We pamper, then entertain, then promote ourselves and in the end the soul is empty, and we are unfulfilled. Look at the lives of the rich and famous. Are they happy people? Do they have happy marriages, happy family life, happy children? Are these content, fulfilled, satisfied people? The deadness of the soul is a constant, daily reminder that man cannot live by bread alone. Life apart from God is not life at all, just survival. We must have the blessing of God. Apart from that blessing bread and circuses cannot sustain us. With that blessing we need, ultimately, nothing else in all the world.

The Second Temptation

Second, Jesus is tempted to leap from the pinnacle of the temple.

The first temptation is one not to trust God and at the same time trust myself. God will not provide, and I can. It is the temptation to lose faith, to doubt, to lose confidence in God while retaining faith in myself. As we move now to the second temptation we will see that it is the opposite of the first. It is the temptation to abuse faith, to presume upon faith, to cross the line that separates supreme confidence in God from recklessness.

Then the devil took Him into the holy city; and he had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple. (Matthew 4:5)

Matthew tells us that the devil “took” Jesus into the “holy city,” Jerusalem, to the “pinnacle of the temple.” The commentators are not sure about what exactly is meant by “pinnacle”, though that it refers to a peak in the temple complex, which at its tallest point was 180 feet high, is clear enough. It also is not clear as to whether “took” means physically or in a vision.

and said to Him, If You are the Son of God throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give His angels charge concerning You'; and 'On their hands they will bear You up, Lest You strike Your foot against a stone.' (Matthew 4:6)

As was the case last time, the devil is subtle.

Notice immediately that the devil quotes Scripture. He does not so hate God and His word that he'll not quote it to his advantage, here citing Psalm 91:11,12. The devil is not above twisting Scripture to his own ends. Satan is able, when he needs to, to dress up in religious garb, and appear, as Paul says, as an "angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14). He can talk our talk. He can show up in church, quote the Bible, use the language of Zion, put on a holy smile, and be religious. "His servants," Paul says, "disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor 11:15). The church has its hypocrites who do all of the above. They will quote Scripture when their aim is not to obey but to evade. All of the cults do the same. They warp and distort what the Bible teaches even as they quote it! Many professed unbelievers are not above it either. "Judge not lest you be judged," they'll tell anyone who forms a moral opinion. Sociologist Alan Wolfe refers in his recently published book, *One Nation, After All*, to America's new "Eleventh Commandment: Thou shalt not judge." This verse is quoted and interpreted as though Jesus intended us to suspend all moral judgments, which of course, is silly. But the point is that even unbelievers, even the devil himself, will quote the Bible when it suits them. The Bible, like any book or document (say, like the U.S. Constitution or the Declaration of Independence) can be twisted out of context and distorted. This is why it is important that we be students of the Bible like the noble-minded Bereans who "searched the Scriptures daily" to see if the things taught by their teachers were really true (Acts 17:11). The answer to Scripture-twisting is not to throw up one's hands and give up on the Bible. You'll hear people refuse to evaluate the claims of the various religions or denominations because "they all quote the Bible." Consequently, they throw out the Bible all together. It would make as much sense to give up on food because people have been known to get sick, or poisoned or obese. The abuse of Scripture is not an argument against its proper use. The answer to scripture-twisting is diligent study.

Notice next that the devil is capable of presenting a plausible argument. What exactly is the temptation here? At first glance, one would not normally find such a suggestion to be alluring. Dive from the pinnacle of the temple? What would be gained? We will need to do some speculating. Perhaps Jesus would gain proof that He was the Son of God. The appeal of such a leap might be to answer any lingering questions that Jesus *Himself* might have about his identity. Similarly, perhaps it is suggested as a means of offering proof to *others* regarding his identity. Probably as well it is a challenge to Jesus to demonstrate the greatness of His faith. Here is a promise, the devil is saying. God says he won't allow you to "strike your foot against a stone." Do you believe it? Then show me. Jump! The temptation is to push Jesus over the line that separates faith from presumption. The devil correctly cites Psalm 91:11,12. God does protect His people generally and His Messiah in particular. But does that mean that they or He can indulge reckless behavior and call it faith?

Whatever is the precise point of the temptation, Jesus may not “test” God in order to prove that point, whether to Himself or to others. Were He to leap from the pinnacle it would certainly provide spectacular proof of His identify or of His faith. But He would be forcing God to intervene when God has not promised to do so. The promise of Psalm 91 is that God protects us in the ongoing paths of life. Satan, however, “urges Christ to plunge Himself into danger, as if to say,” notes Calvin, “If you take a death leap against God’s will, the angel will defend your life” (I,141). As was the case on the first temptation, it is a matter of calling. Has God called Jesus to leap from the pinnacle of the temple? Has God, with such a calling, promised protection and care at that point at that time? The answer is no. He has not. Consequently to require it of God is invalid.

It is not faith to abandon the ordinary means that God has given to us to accomplish a task and then cry out for special intervention to save us. In other words, if you ride in a car, you have to wear your seat-belts. If you ride a motorcycle, you have to wear a helmet. If you hike in the mountains, you have to stay on proven, safe paths. If you jump from a plane, you have to use a parachute! If you want to remain healthy, you have to eat right, exercise and rest. If you want to get well, you have to see the doctor and take your medicine. It is presumption to pray for God’s help and then not use the means He has given to protect us. But the point here is that it is a plausible argument that the devil makes. At first glance, there seems to be something to what he says. People don’t run off to mountains to wait for the return of Christ at the urging of some end-times guru because they are glasse-eyed and can’t think straight. The arguments, though wrong, are plausible. They get involved in the Jonestowns and Wacos not utterly in the face of reason, but because there is something appealing about such groups. Countless believers have fallen for the devil’s logic. Many of the more zealous of God’s people have allowed faith to become an excuse for either inactivity or irresponsibility. They are not using the means at hand, instead waiting for a miracle, leaping from a pinnacle, demanding a miracle. “Catch me,” they say, like a child jumping off a jungle gym. This is not legitimate, and it’s not faith.

Finally, Jesus fights Scripture with Scripture.

Jesus said to him, On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.' (Matthew 4:7)

Jesus counters the devil’s erroneous citation with a correct one. He goes back to another passage (Dt 6:16) from the period of Israel’s wilderness wanderings. The full text then is,

You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah.
(Deuteronomy 6:16)

“Massah” refers to the grumbling of the people for water in Exodus 17, answered by God’s direction to Moses to “strike the rock at Horeb,” out of which water flowed. The people tested God, demanding that He immediately and miraculously act to meet their needs. This, Moses said, they must never do again. Our immediate point is that Jesus’ knowledge of Scripture

equips him to counterattack when under Satan's barrage. Jesus fights the Devil's suggestions not with his own strength and wisdom but with the wisdom of Scripture. Surely this is one of the major lessons to learn from this whole incident. Scripture is our weapon in our war with the Evil One. It is the "sword of the Spirit," a vital component in our spiritual armor (Eph 6:11-13,17). Could anything underscore more urgently our need to know Scripture generally and memorize whole passages in particular. The Psalmist says,

Thy word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against Thee. (Psalm 119:11)

This is why we emphasize memorizing of catechisms and hymns, as summaries of Scripture truth, and of Psalms and Bible passages themselves. We are vulnerable to the subtle deceptions and seductions of the devil. On our own, we are no match for his tricks. He's crafty. He's a deceiver. We must "be on the alert" (1 Pet 5:8). The "evil one" has his "flaming missiles" (Eph 6:16). Why do you think that otherwise sensible people do senseless, self-destructive things? Why do grown men throw away their marriages and families for an "exciting" fling with another woman? How is it that once honest people end up embezzling funds? The devil deceives. He convinces that one time won't be so bad, or that it's no big deal, and so on. And they give in. Before they know it they're enslaved to the devil's deceptions, and seductions must be fought off with the wisdom of God's word. With Biblical wisdom one is able to see right through his schemes. Our answer should be, "God's word says that I can't. I may not steal, even a little. I may not get drunk, even a little. I may not lie. I may not cheat. I may no deceive. Not even a little!"

The particular test that Jesus refutes is that of forcing God to bail us out of trials of our own making. We are testing God when we take unnecessary risks and then claim His promises of protection as an excuse for doing so. It is testing God to claim His promises of blessing and borrow money against them, forcing Him to "pay up." I was involved in a Christian endeavor a few years ago which was doing a good work, trusted God to provide for that good work, and so borrowed tens of thousands of dollars to operate the ministry and called it faith. I called it presumption and testing God. Does He not warn us in His word that the borrower will become the lender's slave? (Prov 22:7). Don't back God into a corner. Don't go out on a limb, saw it off, and then demand that He honor His promises of protection by preventing you from falling to the ground. Nations test each other in this way all the time, don't they? We draw a line in the sand and warn, "Don't step over." They then step over and "test" us to see if we'll do anything. This is what the devil wants us to do with the promises of God. He wants us to saw off limbs and cry out for protection! Yes we should trust God to supply all our needs (Phil 4:19). But we should also let Him tell us what our needs are and how He intends to supply them. Often what He calls needs is quite different from what we call them. Likewise what we think of as fulfilling them may be quite different from what He thinks of as fulfilling them. We must not ever find ourselves in the position of telling God what He must do to honor His promises. He, after all, is God. We are but His poor servants. Don't demand that He supply money, healing, miracles and

so on in a particular case when He has not promised them. Live sober, careful lives of trustful obedience. This is not as glamorous as diving from pinnacles. But it isn't testing God either.

The Third Temptation

Third, Jesus was tempted to receive the kingdoms of the world in exchange for the worship of Satan. This is perhaps at the same time the greatest of the temptations and the most obvious of all. It may also be the most universal of all. The heart of it is this: shall we do evil that good may come? Can the ends justify the means? An hundred times a day we face that question. Shall I cheat to save money? Shall I lie to save face? Shall I gossip to rally support for myself? Shall I indulge my anger or lust so that I'll feel better? This is the kind of test that the devil places before Jesus, only in an exaggerated form.

Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory. (Matthew 4:8)

Since there is no “very high mountain” from which “all the kingdoms of the world” may be seen, we are probably right to conclude that Jesus was taken to both the pinnacle of the temple and to this mountaintop through visions, not physically.

and he said to Him, "All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me." (Matthew 4:9)

“All these things” can be yours, he says. “There is so much good that you can do,” he implies. But, there is a catch. Let’s look at the devil’s promise, its price, and Jesus’ response.

We begin with the devil’s promise. After showing Jesus, “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory,” he promises, “All these things will I give you...” (vv. 10,11). Were the kingdoms of the world the devil’s to give? Not ultimately. Of course God always retained His final sovereignty over all creation. But there is a sense in which the world was the devil’s domain from the time of the fall to the cross, and in part, remains such to this day. In Luke’s version of this temptation the devil elaborates,

I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. (Luke 4:6)

The cross destroyed the devil’s claim upon and power over the world. Through His death Christ “render(ed) powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.” (Heb 2:14). But note, he did have “the power of death.” Jesus said of his ministry,

Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself. (Jn 12:31,32)

Note, the devil was “the ruler of this world.” This also is the meaning of the binding of Satan in Revelation 20. Jesus came to “bind” the strong man and spoil his good (Mk 3:27). The devil’s dominion over the world has thus been ended by the cross. Christ now rules supreme “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named” (Eph 1:21). He “disarmed the rulers and authorities” and “made a public display of them, having triumphed over them” (Col 2:15). But this victory of Christ, like so many other things, is another case of the already and the not yet. The binding of Satan is not absolute. He is bound “that he should not deceive the nations any longer” (Rev 20:3). The nations are free from bondage to the absolute darkness in which the devil once held them and the gospel flows freely to the nations. But he is still a “roaring lion,” as we have seen. The devil is defeated but his defeat awaits consummation. His binding is not absolute. In the meantime, the kingdom of God is present wherever Christ is received and the devil holds sway wherever Christ is not present. Thus Paul can write of “the god of this world” who “has blinded the minds of the unbelieving” (2 Cor 4:4). Similarly John can write that “the whole world,” meaning not all of creation, as though

Christ had not come, but the whole fallen, rebellious, unbelieving world, “lies in the power of the evil one” (1 Jn 5:19).

Yet one day the rule of Christ will be consummated. Paul writes, “for He (Jesus) must reign *until* He has put all His enemies under His feet” (1 Cor 15:25). He reigns *now*, yet that reign must be completed. Daniel prophesied of the Son of Man,
And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, That all the peoples, nations, and men of every language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:14).

The end of Matthew’s gospel tells that

Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.’ (Matthew 28:18)

He has all authority. One day that authority will be fully manifested. But such will happen only at cost and after a long and painful process. The temptation then is to have it all now without the pain and suffering that his calling as beloved Son and suffering servant requires (3:17).

What then was being offered? Matthew speaks of “the Kingdoms... and their glory.” The emphasis seems to be on the “glory” or “splendor” (*doxa*) that is to be found in the city of man. It is all that among human achievements which evokes genuine admiration and appeal. There is no sense denying that such things exist. There is no *reason* to deny that they don’t. The devil was not showing Jesus the squalor of human existence. He did not conduct a tour of the slums. He showed Jesus the achievements of man at their apex. He might have shown Jesus the Great Pyramids of Giza in Egypt, with their two and a half ton bricks, some 2.3 million of them in the largest of the pyramids, all moved into place without the benefit of wheels. He might have shown Him the glory of ancient Greece, its literature, its sculpture, its art, its architecture, including the beautiful temple complex atop the Acropolis, with its famous Parthenon. He might have shown Him the greatness of the Roman empire, with its fabulous wealth, its extraordinary military prowess, its roads, its laws, its buildings, and its republican ideals. Jesus might have seen disciplined Roman armies marching on sturdy Roman roads in defense of order and commerce and the *Pax Romana* established by Caesar Augustus. He might have given him a vision of the future, of the civilizing of barbarian Europe in the Middle Ages, the revival of classical culture during the Renaissance, the rediscovery of the Biblical text and languages during the Reformation, the learning of the Enlightenment, the science and technology of modern times. The achievements of mankind are remarkable, accelerated in recent times by technological advances. Whether we examine cultural achievements such as architecture, music, art, and literature, or political achievements, such as the development of democratic organizations and the rule of law, or commercial developments, such as democratic capitalism and the accumulation of wealth, or the building of military power, or technological and scientific advancement, all this evokes our wonder, even our astonishment. From the mysteries of Egypt, to the glories of Greece, to the splendor of Rome, to the piety of the Middle Ages, to the art and learning of the Renaissance and Reformation, to the scientific discoveries of the Enlightenment and Modern eras, the kingdoms of man are full of much that is admirable and desirable.

What is the appeal of this temptation? The more base side of the temptation is this: all this may be yours to enjoy and to control. It is an appeal to one's lust and one's pride. All the wealth, all the luxury, all the pleasures of this world are yours to have. They are at your disposal. And just as importantly, they are yours to control. You will have the power to determine the direction of literally everything. Do not underestimate the power of this appeal. The ability to control is a fundamental divine of the human race, more so, I believe, than even money or pleasure. We want control. And the fact is someone will control in each and every situation. Control or power itself is neutral. The question is, is a particular quest for control legitimate or illegitimate in a given circumstance? Human nature abhors a vacuum, and so power rushes in whenever one exists. Much of human conflict revolves around this question, whether it is issues between mothers and their teenage daughters or between nations. We want control!

But even more tempting for Jesus is the two-fold implication of this grant of power. First, because You will have control, there is much good that can be done, and second, it can be done right now. All this is yours to have, the devil says, and importantly, yours to rule. What could be better than that? All the kingdoms of the world might immediately have come under the rule of Christ. He might instantly have toppled all the tyrants then in power. He might have ended oppression and injustice. With Christ upon the world's throne, there might have been an immediate end to much of the world's suffering. Righteousness and truth would have been firmly established. Justice would have prevailed. In addition, the genius and energy of humanity in its cultural, artistic, political, and commercial expressions might have been redirected and fully harnessed for the glory of God and good of man. Rather than wasting resources on war, crime, and obscenity they might all have been put to the service of the kingdom of Christ, producing only that which is lovely and pure (Phil 4:8). Think of what good might be done! And it might have been done right then! There need have been no delay! Indeed, the argument might have been, does Jesus not have a moral obligation to do "whatever it takes" to bring this about? He dare not allow religious questions to get in the way. Not when we're dealing with the possibility of ending for all time all hunger, disease, pestilence, crime, war, that is, all human suffering. Does He not have an obligation to do *whatever it takes* to bring this about? Is it not selfish of Him, and narrow, to quibble about religious questions when so much good for so many might now be done?

This sort of reasoning might be working on Him, bringing tremendous pressure to bear on Him to compromise. You may remember the comment of Henry of Navarre, the leader of the Huguenots and next in succession to the French throne, who when offered the crown if he would convert to Catholicism said, "Paris is worth a Mass." He compromised and converted, with the result that much good was indeed done. The Edict of Nantes was issued and the Huguenots were granted toleration. The wars of religion in France stopped for a season. Jesus could do the same, the ends justifying the means.

In addition, all this might be done without the cross. This is probably the greatest temptation of all. Jesus knows that He is called to suffer as God's servant. He knows that He faces fierce conflict with the devil, intense suffering, humiliation, rejection, and finally the tortures of the cross. The end or goal of that suffering is the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Might He not establish that Kingdom through other means, means that bypass suffering? Why can He not take a shortcut to the crown and avoid the dark future that awaits Him?

The appeal is in a sense the same as that of the lottery. Is there a way that I can get rich without the pain of labor? Can I accumulate wealth without having to work hard and save, without having to practice discipline and frugality? Can I become a great athlete without having to exercise, and train, and practice and drill? Can I find a way to get all A's in school without having to study, or at least, without having to do homework? May I become famous and influential without having to develop virtuous character? Can you have the crown with cross? The devil is offering to hand all the world to Jesus on a platter, without pain, without suffering, without a cross. Again, can the ends justify the means?

But, at what price are the Kingdoms offered? The devil always has his price. He has kingdoms to give, but there is a cost. What price will Jesus have to pay? Look again at verse 9;

and he said to Him, 'All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me.'
(Matthew 4:9)

The price is a compromise with evil. The demand of the devil that Jesus "fall down and worship" him is so obviously and blatantly unacceptable that we might tend to dismiss it at this point as a temptation at all. But let's look closer and examine it from this perspective.

In the first instance, notice that one might be tempted to say, "Paris is worth a mass." It is only religion, after all. He's not being asked to do something immoral or violent. He's not being offered the kingdoms of the world if only He'll go slit someone's throat. The devil is not saying, "I'll give you all the world to rule if only you'll sleep with a woman not your wife." He's not being asked to rob a bank. He's not being asked to bear false witness against an innocent man. He's not being asked to murder or maim or fornicate or steal or lie. He's just being asked to offer acts of worship to Satan. Remember too, Satan is likely to be manifesting himself in his most appealing form, as "an angel of light," not as a horrid, nauseating-looking creature, and certainly not as a comical being in a red suit, with horns and a pointed tail. He likely has his own splendor and brilliance that would call for worship if one did not know better. He may appear brilliant and beautiful to look at, inspiring gasps of wonder and amazement.

Add to this the fact that this may be "just do it once" offer. "Just this one time come and fall down and worship me. Just once." The devil may be implying, "What would it hurt? Look at all the good that will result. Then it will all work out for everyone included. You'll get what you want, and everything will be wonderful. Don't be so rigid. Don't be so narrow. It will be over quickly enough. Come on! Play along. Just once! The unspoken but nearly universally assumed principle is if you want to get ahead, if you want what the world offers, you've got to use the devil's means. That's the only way to be successful in this world. You'll have to compromise. You'll have to bend the rules and the truth. Good guys, after all, finish last. You may need to lie in court, or cheat on your income tax, or desecrate the Sabbath, or make false claims, or deny responsibility, or produce a defective product, and so on. Play it straight and you'll never get anywhere. Come at it with an over-sensitive conscience, or rigid ideas of right and wrong, and you're sure to fail in this business. Is this not what is typically said? Success in this world requires compromise. In essence - you'll have to make a deal with the devil.

Despite the direct, blatant, obvious offensiveness of the devil's demand, we can see that it was still a genuine temptation, and one which parallels our own, though ours, of course, is more limited. Whenever we seek the things of this world anywhere but from God's hands and through God's means, we are in effect bargaining with the devil.

Finally, what is Jesus' response?

It is immediate and decisive.

Begone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.' (Matthew 4:10)

Jesus cites an Old Testament text, and it ends the discussion and the temptation. God forbids that I worship anyone but Him, He says. Oh that we should be so decisively under the authority of Scripture! Oh that we should respond to temptation with, "No! For it is written..."

Jesus doesn't entertain evil. He doesn't gaze at it, pick it up, turn it over, shake it, toy with it, flirt with it. No He instantly banished it. "Be gone, Satan!" He says. As was the case with the last temptation, he cites Deut 6, this time v. 13. There Moses warns the people of God of the temptation they will face when they settle in the promised land and begin to prosper. He warns them,

then watch yourself, lest you forget the Lord who brought you from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deuteronomy 6:12)

Instead, here is what you must do;

You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him, and swear by His name. (Deuteronomy 6:13)

And here is what you must not do:

You shall not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who surround you. (Deuteronomy 6:14)

That is the end of it for Jesus. The Scripture absolutely governs His life. As we've seen, each time He answers the temptation with debate ending Scripture citations. No less should be true for us. The Bible must govern our choices not our emotions, our desires, or our taste. This is what I see happening all the time. People know what the Bible teaches. But then they get angry, or disillusioned, or "fall in love," and the rationalizations begin and the Bible goes out the window; along with church vows, marriage vows, and anything else that gets in the way of me doing what I want.

What Jesus also knows is that the devil can't deliver on his promises. He knows that once He gives in to evil just a little bit, He is through. His mission is over. Why? Because He will not be able to deal with root causes. He cannot bear the sin of the world if He Himself is not sinless. Besides, the compromise of the devil is a decision to bypass the cross, the only means by which humanity might be saved. In other words, what the devil promises is an illusion. The alleged good that could be done cannot be done. Evil would remain unconquered. The human heart would remain unchanged. Guilt would remain unaddressed. Moreover the demands would not stop. The devil not only cannot deliver what he promises but he also delivers far more than he promises. The devil would not be satisfied with one act of worship. He'd demand another. And another. There'd be no end to it. Compromise with the devil and you quickly become the devil's slave. The little bit of sin that he seductively suggests that you indulge will never stop there and may have catastrophic results. One moment of weakness may result in a teenage girl becoming pregnant and having to deal with the consequences of that conception for the *rest of her life*. One self-indulgent moment may result in an adulterous act that will destroy a marriage, a family, with psychological and spiritual consequences for generations. Indulge your anger one time, put your fingers in the till one time, bend the truth one time, and you may pay the consequences for the rest of your life and even for *all of eternity!*

This too is how we must deal with temptations to compromise with the devil. We must never accept the argument that the ends justify the means. Shall we do evil that good may come, Paul asks (Rom 3:8)? Never! We must know the Scripture. We must be clear, decisive, resolute, and as we are faithful, the Lord meets us in our need.

Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him.
(Matthew 4:11)

Even as the temptations of Jesus were unique, so God's provision for Him is unique. "Angels" come and "minister" to Him. But the promise holds true for us as well. Our God shall supply all our needs (Phil 4:19). The promise of Ps 91:11 is now fulfilled. So also will it be in our lives as well.

This first skirmish with the devil ends in victory for Jesus. He resists and the devil flees. It anticipates the decisive victory over the devil at the cross and the consummation of that victory in the second coming. Our foe is a defeated, even mortally wounded enemy. In Christ, we enter into that victory. As we resist the devil he flees from us as well! Amazing, but true. As we resist he flees (Jas 4:7). We see dramatically here the truth that in Christ we are more than conquerors (Rom 8:37).

When Jesus Began to Preach
Matthew 4:12-17
XIV. Expositions of Matthew's Gospel
March 29, 1998

Up to this point in Matthew's gospel Jesus has not yet inaugurated his public ministry. He has been baptized, and He has battled Satan in the wilderness. But He has not yet launched out on His public ministry of preaching, teaching and healing. He has, thus far, remained largely in the background. He has not been utterly devoid of activity. Alone among the gospel writers John tells us of an earlier Galilean ministry, which included the miracle at the wedding of Cana of Galilee (Jn 1:19 - 2:12), followed by a short Judean ministry, when he first cleansed the temple and told Nicodemus he must be "born again" (Jn 2:13 - 3:21), and a brief Samaritan ministry when he encountered the woman at the well as he continued to travel north to Galilee (Jn 3:22 - 4:42). But this earlier time of ministry was probably more spontaneous than planned, perhaps a consequence of His journey from Nazareth south to John in Judea, and back north to Nazareth again. Then He seems to have waited. Only now we are introduced to his public ministry. What triggered its onset? What was His message? How was it communicated? Matthew now introduces these important themes to us.

When he began to preach

*Now when He heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee
(Matthew 4:12).*

When did Jesus begin publicly to preach? Matthew tells us it was only "when He heard that John had been taken into custody," or "arrested." Matthew does not present the details of John's arrest until 14:3-12. When we reach chapter 14 we will examine the incident in detail. Suffice it for now to say that he was imprisoned for denouncing Herod Antipas' illicit relationship with his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. This imprisonment had the effect of ending John's public ministry of preparing the way for the Christ (3:1ff). The end of the preparatory ministry signaled to Jesus that the time had come for the ministry of Him whose way had been prepared. Now that John's ministry of preparation was over, Jesus' ministry for which he had prepared must begin.

Where he began to preach

Where did Jesus' public ministry begin? "He withdrew into Galilee," Matthew says. Withdrew from where? From Judea, during which time He had been conducting the preliminary ministry in Judea and Samaria mentioned above. Why did He go there? Some have suggested that this move may be a strategic withdrawal from the immediate view of the authorities. Or it may just mean that he "departed" (as the KJV renders the word translated "withdrew" in the NASV) for Galilee because He planned to make it, not the wilderness of Judea (as John did), the center of his ministry. Some commentators (e.g. Morris) have argued that this may not be a retreat because not even in Galilee could Jesus avoid Herod Antipas. Both regions, Judea and Galilee, were under his jurisdiction. Even so, in Galilee, Jesus would not be right under the noses of the religious authorities and consequently subject to less intense scrutiny.

Galilee was not only north of Jerusalem, but also north of Samaria, sharing its northern border with Syria.

In addition, Galilee was a very fertile, prosperous, ethnically diverse region, through which “the traffic of the world passed,” says Barclay (67). Though measuring only 50 miles north to south, by 25 miles east to west, its population was “enormous” for its size, says Barclay. Its important roads brought new ideas, new peoples, and new influences to the region. Whereas Judea was isolated, Galilee was open and consequently likely to be more receptive to Jesus’ message.

and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali (Matthew 4:13).

Then Jesus left Nazareth, perhaps because of its rejection of Him as recorded in Luke 4:16-31, or perhaps because Capernaum was “a busy lakeside town,” as R.T. France notes, which as such would have “ensured a wider audience for Jesus’ teaching than Nazareth” (101). It then becomes Jesus’ home base. But there was also a larger theological reason for moving to Capernaum. It was located in “the districts of Zebulun and Naphtali,” that is, within the boundaries of the lands promised to those two tribes. A home there fulfilled Old Testament prophecy respecting the Messiah. Jesus came to dwell there,

This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying, ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, And to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, Upon them a light dawned’ (Matthew 4:14-16).

Matthew cites Isaiah 9:1,2, a prophesy of the deliverance of the northern kingdom of Israel from captivity. Remember the ten northern tribes were conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The darkness of captivity and death would be relieved through the light of deliverance that God would send. That relief began with the return of the Babylonian captives in 538, and again in 458 and 444 BC. But now the promise of Isaiah finds its ultimate fulfillment in the light of Christ. This provides another example of how the promises of God to the nation of Israel find their fulfillment in Christ. He is the fulfillment of both predictive prophesy regarding the Messiah and typological prophesy in which the nation foreshadowed the ministry of Christ. Thus far we have seen the following:

- * He would be born of a virgin (1:23)
- * He would be born in Bethlehem (2:6)
- * He would be preceded by preparatory prophetic ministry (3:3)
- * Like Israel, He would sojourn *in*, and then be called *out* of Egypt (2:13-15)
- * Like Israel, He would endure the slaughter of the innocent (2:18)
- * Like Israel he would be baptized (3:13-17)
- * Like Israel he would be tempted in the wilderness (4:1-11)
- * Like Israel salvation begins in Galilee (4:12-17)

Matthew's point, once more, is that this One, who fulfills so much prophesy, is truly the Messiah (see also 2:23). He is qualified to do all that Messiah is called to do. His light will begin to shine "by way of the sea," or "toward the sea" (RSV), "beyond" or "toward" the Jordan. Rather than "beyond the Jordan," referring to the Transjordanian region (east of the river), as some commentators have thought Isaiah, and Matthew are probably describing Galilee (west of the Jordan) "from the perspective of the Assyrian invader, as the land west of the river" (France, 101).

The need his preaching addresses

Jesus is focusing his ministry on Galileans. But they represent a far greater reality. The "Galilee" to whom Jesus preaches is "Galilee of the Gentiles," of the "nations" (*ethnon*). They represent the mission of gospel to the nations. Even in Isaiah's day Galilee was a region with a mixed population. The great surprise then and now is that the Jewish Messiah would concentrate his ministry not in Jerusalem, but in what Morris calls "despised Galilee" (81). He comes not to the center of orthodoxy, but to lowly, heterodox Galilee. This is consistent with the mission of Christ throughout. He comes to preach good news to the poor. He comes to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance. He comes to seek and save the lost.

Galilee then is the chosen location for his ministry because it represents the nations, or all humanity. What then are we to make of the human need as described in v 16?

'The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, And to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, Upon them a light dawned' (Matthew 4:16).

The problem of man, of both Jewish Israel and Gentile Galilee, is that he is "sitting in darkness." He is not passing through darkness, rather, he is in a settled condition, "sitting," habitually, continually dwelling in darkness. What does darkness represent? It represents the darkness of ignorance, of moral depravity, and of hopelessness. Look at these one at a time.

First, humanity dwells in the darkness of ignorance of God and truth. It worships God as a wooden pole, or a statue of stone, or a tree, or the sun, or almost anything or nearly everything. People may be pantheistic, or deistic, or animistic, or atheistic, but they've always got it wrong. They don't know if man is animal or a god, an angel or a devil. They don't know who we are or why we're here or where we're going. Man is in darkness. His life is confusion. God described Nineveh to Jonah, then one of the leading cities of the world, as a city of "more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand" (Jonah 4:11). This is how it is apart from Christ. But when His light begins to shine, we begin to see reality clearly for the first time. He dispels the darkness and reveals the truth about God and humanity and the meaning of life. To see me, Jesus says, is to see the Father (Jn 14:9).

Second, humanity dwells in the darkness of moral depravity. The world is a violent, brutal, degrading place. I recently read a new biography of Hannibal, the almost conqueror of Rome. I was struck again and again at the almost unbelievable barbarism of the ancient world. Life was cheap, and one's slaves or enemies were regarded as something less than animals, and were casually maimed, tortured,

brutalized or morally degraded. Yet the 20th century, with its holocausts and world wars, has improved on the ancients only in its sanitizing of mass murder and moral perversion. They hacked off limbs. We use bullets and gas chambers. They burned cities to the ground. We speak of “surgical” air strikes. But essentially human nature remains unchanged. The human heart is corrupt, twisted, dark. As was true in Isaiah’s day, good is called evil and evil is called good (Isa 5:20). Having the freedom to choose is good: restricting abortion is bad, possibly limiting one’s educational and vocational opportunities. Expressing and venting one’s passions and impulses is good. Repressing and controlling them is bad, even psychologically damaging. Having an open mind is good. Believing there are absolute standards of right and wrong is bad, leading to exclusion and judgmentalism. Evil is good, good is evil. Light is dark, dark is light. The light of Christ cuts through the fog. It shines into the dark corners bringing *the* light which shows us *the* way and *the* truth (Jn 14:6).

Third, humanity dwells in a darkness of hopelessness. Modern man doesn’t know what life is about. He doesn’t know who he is or where he is going. Life has no meaning. Life is absurd and hopeless. He sees no significance in himself or his actions. He can find no basis for morals or meaning. He lives a life of “quiet desperation.” So he sits “in the land and shadow of death.” He lives in death’s shadow, close to it, constantly haunted by it and threatened by it. He lives in the fear of death, death which he cannot understand, death which he cannot escape. But Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die” (Jn 11:25). He conquers death and promises deliverance. He restores hope, significance, and meaning.

The response his preaching requires

What light did Jesus bring to this darkness? What message did He preach? The inauguration of His ministry was as “a light” that “dawned.” His light began to shine in darkness, exposing ignorance, exposing moral degradation, and showing the way to the downcast. Of what did the first flicker of that light consist? Matthew writes,

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Matthew 4:17).

“Repent,” Jesus says. As we saw earlier, to repent is literally to change one’s mind. He knows that the one thing that all people need to do and must do is believe what He says and repent. They must turn from their sins to God. He takes it for granted that all men are sinners and need to repent. Given the universality of sin, the first thing out of Jesus’ mouth is “repent.” Repent of your twisted notions of God and truth. Repent of your abominations and perversions. Repent of your despondency and hopelessness. The light of Christ uncovers our ignorance and foolishness and calls us to repent. Have you encountered Jesus Christ? If you have bumped into the real Jesus, you’ll know it because you will see your need to confess your ignorance, your idolatry, your immorality, your dishonesty, your cruelty; to confess it and forsake it and never touch it again.

“Repent,” Jesus says, “for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Repent because the “kingdom” or “rule” of God (“heaven” is a circumlocution) has come. The “Kingdom of God” is a major theme in Matthew

and the occasion of extensive academic discussion. One can cut through most of it by keeping in mind that “Kingdom” means “rule.” In Christ God’s rule has come. You have but one reasonable response. Submit to that rule. Submit to Him. Don’t kick against the goads. Don’t resist. Don’t rebel. This is not so much an invitation as a demand. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Repent! Submit! Surrender!

Have you begun to see that this is what you must do? If you do, give thanks to God because it is only by His grace that we ever accurately understand the darkness of our own hearts. He gives us the grace to overcome self-deception and see our pride, our rebellion, our selfishness for what they really are. He gives us the grace to truly repent. We cannot and will not turn from sin in our own strength. But by His grace we must and shall repent, and thereby enter the realm of Christ’s rule.

The Ministry of Jesus
Matthew 4:18-25
XV. Expositions of Matthew’s Gospel
April 5, 1998

JESUS HAS A SHORT TIME IN WHICH TO CONDUCT his earthly ministry. For three years He will minister publicly. Then swiftly will follow His arrest, His execution and burial, His resurrection and ascension. What He is to accomplish in His time before the cross, He must accomplish now. Consequently it is with more than a little curiosity that we examine the methods that He employed in laying a foundation for the church that would endure. What did Jesus do? What techniques did He use? What priorities did he have? Upon what did He concentrate? Our interest is keen because we too want a ministry that will endure. It is one thing to be popular in the present time. It is quite another to build a work that will still be around two thousand years later. I remember hearing Gordon-Conwell and Reformed Theological Seminary Professor of Theology, Roger Nicole, being asked in class about why the “experiment of the New England Puritans” failed. His response was “What failure?” “They founded a 250 million nation, didn’t they?” Oh, that we should suffer such failure, that what we start today should still stand three hundred and seventy five years later! How many of today’s popular religious movements will still be around in fifty years, much less two thousand? How many of the so-called “contemporary” churches? How many of the so-called TV ministries? How many of the books being written, songs being composed, sermons being preached, will be valued a generation from now? The sermons and books of Augustine and Chrysostom are still read today, one thousand years later. The Scottish and Genevan metrical Psalms and the hymns of Watts and Wesley are still being sung, hundreds of years after they were written. How much of what we’re doing today will last?

What Jesus does endures. How does he do it? Verses 18-25 provide a short summary for us.

Preaching and Teaching

First, Jesus conducted a ministry of preaching and teaching. Last time we read in v17,

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' (Matthew 4:17)

Here we read further,

And Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

The word translated “preach” in v17 shares the same root as that translated “proclaiming” in v23. *Kērussein* means “to proclaim,” or “herald.” A *Kērux*, a preacher, is one who delivers the message of the king. It is authoritative proclamation. The messenger does not alter the message with which He is entrusted. He faithfully declares all that the king has said. The act of delivering that authoritative proclamation is called *kēruss«n*, preaching.

France identifies teaching with “biblical exposition” and contrasts it with “public proclamation” (105). Morris contrasts “systematic instruction” with “forthright proclamation, a setting forth of certain facts” (88). Preaching declares, teaching explains. But this distinction between teaching and preaching is not absolute. Preaching teaches, and teaching proclaims. Both, moreover, are concerned with the same content. Jesus is both preaching *and* teaching “the gospel of the kingdom” (v23). The “gospel” is the *euangelian*, the “good news.” What good news? The good news that in Christ Jesus the “kingdom” or “rule” of God has come. Is this good news? Not for those who want to continue to wallow in their sins. But for everyone who will receive Christ, it means the defeat of our adversary the devil, freedom from the power of sin and evil, forgiveness, the cleansing of one’s heart, and eternal life! This is like the arrival of the cavalry at Ft. Apache or the landing of the allied armies at D-Day. It means that deliverance has come.

How is this message communicated? Primarily through the spoken word. Primarily by preaching and teaching. We might note out loud that there were, even in the first century, other alternatives. No, Jesus did not have video and computer and television and cinema at His disposal. But still God might have sent his Son with a canvas and brush. God might have sent his Son to stroll with a guitar, like a troubadour. God might have sent his Son with a leotard and slippers. But He didn’t. Drama had become quite sophisticated amongst the Greeks. All the ancients danced. The Romans were great patrons of sculpture and art. But Jesus preaches and teaches. Why? Because preaching as exhortation and teaching as exposition are the God-ordained means of propagating His truth and building the saints. Why? Because preaching is uniquely authoritative mode of communication. Preaching is not a dialogue. It is a declaration. When God speaks it is not a discussion. Similarly, Biblical exposition makes it clear that the source of one verbal communication is not oneself, but God.

In addition, both preaching and teaching, because they are verbal forms of communication, are uniquely able to communicate both precisely and widely the sometimes subtle, sometimes complex, always piercing, always searching message of the Scripture. The problem with the written word is that people

don't read. Eventually Jesus' message would be written down so that it might be accurately preserved. But initially it was preached. On the other hand, the claim that a picture is worth a thousand words simply isn't true. It is truer to say that a picture is subject to a thousand interpretations, none of which is authoritative. Only words can communicate precisely, especially when it comes to considering complex subjects such as God, the Trinity, human nature, sin, justice, the dual nature of Christ, the atonement, righteousness, and so on.

This is why a Christian civilization has the capacity to develop sophisticated notions like liberty, the rule of law, justice, the separation of powers, and so on. Extraordinarily subtle distinctions are necessary to the existence of such things as Christian orthodoxy and democratic institutions. They cannot be painted or danced or plucked on a fiddle. When God reveals Himself He does so in words. God repeated this point to Israel in underscoring the prohibitions of the second commandment.

So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female...(Deuteronomy 4:15,16; cf. Dt 4:12)

Christianity is a word-centered religion because God demands that it be such. He will not permit images of Himself. He does not commission pictures or statues. He reveals Himself through the preaching of His prophets and supremely through His Son (Heb 1:2). While He also reveals Himself through His mighty acts in history, the greatest of which was the incarnation, these acts are recorded and preserved in words.

This is also the way forward for the church. God doesn't change. Humanity hasn't changed. The fundamentalists are as they have always been. The gospel ever and for always must be spread primarily through preaching. Jesus was a preacher. The apostles were preachers. The church fathers were preachers. The leading monks of the Middle Ages were preachers. The Reformers were preachers. The Puritans were preachers. The leaders of the Great Awakening, Whitefield, Wesley, and the others, were preachers. Every era of health and fruitfulness in the history of the church has been characterized by preaching. Every future era of health and fruitfulness in the Christian church *will be* characterized by preaching. Dr. Hughes Old is in the process of publishing a seven-volume history of preaching. He demonstrates very clearly that this is true. We are committed to the preaching office, with substantial amounts of time given to preaching, because we are convinced that this is true.

Preparation

Second, Jesus' ministry is a ministry of preparation. I might have used the word "discipleship" to describe what we see in vv18-22. But that term is overused these days and can easily create the impression that we're talking about something more complex, more programmatic, than simply preparing a group of men for ministry. The impression is also created that we can duplicate directly what Jesus does. Jesus does not have a "discipleship program" somehow distinct from his preaching ministry. What He does is gather a group of men to be with him as He itinerates so that when He is no

longer on the scene, they will be able to carry on His work. He calls them to leave their vocations and follow him so that they will be there as He teaches and preaches and heals and argues. They will hear it all. They will see it all. They will be taught by Him, corrected by Him, and challenged by Him, and rebuked by Him. The net result will be that they will be ready to carry on His ministry in the future. Here is how it happens.

And walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. (Matthew 4:18)

Matthew doesn't tell us of any previous contact between Jesus and the disciples. But John does, telling us that some of them were disciples of John (Jn 1:35-51). So this call to them is probably not an utterly blind call, and their response is not a completely non-rational leap. Matthew tells us of Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee, a lake in the center of Galilee measuring 13 miles north to south, and 8 miles east to west. Peter and Andrew are "casting a net," referring to a hand held net that might be as many as nine feet across. These nets had weights sewn into their lining, and would sink to the bottom trapping fish underneath them.

And He said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.' (Matthew 4:19)

Jesus uses their current activity as a metaphor for the future to which he is calling them. "Follow me," he says, "and I will make you fishers of men." This expression, "fishers of men," is unprecedented in ancient literature. But Jesus' meaning is clear enough, even unforgettable. Just as they have lowered their nets and brought fish up from the depths of the sea, so they are to cast spiritual nets and draw men up from the depths of sin and degradation. Clearly He is inviting them to a higher calling. 'Thus far you have fished just for fish. But I offer you a greater privilege, greater by the degree to which men are of more value than fish. For I will make you fishers of men.' In addition, He is promising them the resources that they will need to rise to their new task. "I will make you fishers of men," He says. They may have been tempted to think, 'We are but humble, ordinary working men. What can we do? We've not received rabbinic training. We're not Biblical scholars. We've not been trained in rhetoric or public speaking.' Don't worry, Jesus is saying. With the calling goes the gifts. "I will make you what I call you to be."

Their response is immediate.

And they immediately left the nets, and followed Him (Matthew 4:20).

Jesus' personal presence must have been compelling. His call must have been irresistible. This is no small decision that he is calling on them to make. They would be leaving a way of life. They would be leaving their families and loved ones. They would be leaving their homes. They would be leaving their means of financial support. They are being called to forsake all to follow Jesus. And that is exactly what they do. They "left," the aorist indicating "decisive action," says Morris (86). They left their

“nets,” a different word than that used in v18, the plural indicating that they left not just the net that they were then using, but all their nets, i.e. left fishing as a way of life.

This scene is then repeated with James and John.

And going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. (Matthew 4:21)

Notice that they are busy at their vocation when the call of Christ comes. One commentator has pointed out that none of the disciples are called while standing idle in the markets. Their response also is immediate.

And they immediately left the boat and their father, and followed Him. (Matthew 4:22)

Here it is clear that the call of Christ takes priority over family ties. They “left the boat,” that is, fishing as a way of life, “and their father.” His call is absolute.

Here it would be right to point out lines of continuity and discontinuity between the call of Christ then and now. One would be right to point out that this call of Christ to the disciples is unique. No one before or since has been one of the twelve. Not all of us are called to public, “full-time” vocational ministry either. None of us are called to follow an itinerating preacher as he wanders from place to place, and few of us are called to conduct such a ministry. This is why much that has been written about “discipleship programs” in the last few years is suspect. We cannot do exactly what He did. We can’t duplicate His unique authority or His unique itinerating ministry, and shouldn’t. Neither are we limited to a three-year timetable. These are all “special,” peculiar dimensions to His ministry. But there is also a greater sense in which this call is the call of Christ to us all. He calls us all to follow him. Whatever your station or position in life He calls you to follow Him, without regard to cost, without regard to where it might lead. “Follow me,” He says, and that call is not subject to negotiation or qualification. This is still His call today. An important test of whether I am a real Christian or not is how I answer the question. “Am I willing to follow Him wherever He calls? If He calls me, as He did the rich young ruler, to sell all and give it to the poor, would I? If He calls me to go to outer Mongolia as a missionary, will I? A real Christian is one who has gotten out of the driver’s seat and is willing to follow Christ wherever He calls. This is emphatically clear in Matthew 16.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. "For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:24-26)

In following Christ we lose our life. It is not longer mine, it is His. If I attempt to “save my life,” that is, preserve my life as I wish it to be, preserve my circumstances, preserve my control over things, then I “lose” it. Have I given my life to Christ? He requires nothing less if we would save our souls.

He also calls us all to value people and their souls over the commodities of this world. This is clearly implied. Why fish for fish when you can fish for souls? Why live life for the temporal when you can live for the eternal? These are the values expressed in this call of Christ, and they are well worth weighing in our day as well. Young people - set your sights higher than fish. Is your ambition merely to make lots of money and have lots of things? Do you aim at nothing more than boat load after boat load of fish? Come judgment day is that what you wish to tell your Judge and Maker, that you lived only for the comfort and excitement of this world and cared not a twit for the eternal destiny of your fellows? No. He calls us *all* to value souls over temporal comfort. We all must first and foremost fish for men. Some of us He calls to this “full time,” as a vocation as well as a disposition. Why not determine to fish for men? Why not seek Christ’s call into the ministry? Why not spend your vocational life actively working to catch souls and draw them into the kingdom?

Finally, we learn here that Christ calls the church to a future-oriented ministry. His concentration of energy upon the disciple reveals a future-oriented, foundation-building approach to ministry that ought to be characteristic of us as well. This means focusing on leadership, on depth, on children, and thereby building a ministry that is solid and will endure, for generation after generation.

Compassion

Third, Jesus conducted a ministry of compassion.

And Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

Unlike the rabbis who gathered small groups around themselves, and unlike the Qumran-type sects who withdrew to the desert, Jesus went to the synagogues, the center of Jewish life and worship, and gathered multitudes around himself. He not only taught them, but “healed” them, and healed not some, but all, and not through extraordinary techniques, as was typical of “healers” then (as well as now), but directly and simply healed “every” kind of disease and sickness and “all” who are brought to him.

And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. (Matthew 4:24)

“Syria” is the name of the country to the north of Galilee, but is also the name of the Roman province that covered all of Palestine. He healed all, even the worst of them, including “demoniacs, epileptics (literally, “moonstruck,” which could mean “lunatics”), and paralytics. Great multitudes gathered from all parts of Palestine, no doubt curiosity seekers as well as the sincere.

And great multitudes followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. (Matthew 4:25)

Thus Jesus' ministry is wholistic. He is not content to merely heal souls. He heals bodies. He has compassion on the sick and weak. This gives us insight into the heart of our Savior. He is moved by the sight of human suffering. Tirelessly He labors to relieve the distressed. Where the Kingdom is present, the effects of the fall are reversed on all fronts Truth is proclaimed. Error is refuted. Sickness and disease are banished. This is a foretaste of what the Kingdom of God will be like in its final state. There will be no pain, no suffering, no sorrow, no tears (Rev 21:1ff).

This too must be a central part of our ministry. We can't be content with proclaiming truth, saving souls, and not show compassion to those in need as well. Where God's Kingdom is present, ministry is wholistic. This begins with works of mercy amongst ourselves, loving one another, being kind to one another, bearing one another's burdens. But is also means showing compassion on those in need, wherever we encounter it. We proclaim the truth. We also must live it. We preach love. We also must practice it. I'm not sure exactly how to go about doing these things. One on one mercy is clear enough. But how do we help the poor? The illiterate? Those from broken homes? I'm not sure, except that I know that in the long run we must make an impact. I'm thrilled that we're in the thick of helping the ultimate "orphans" of our day, the unborn. We support the crisis pregnancy center, the Living Vine Home for unwed mothers, Bethany services and adoption services. Still, we must do more on more fronts, manifesting the rule of Christ through works of mercy.

This is the ministry of Jesus: preaching, discipling, and healing. May it ever be our own as well.