ETHICS IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

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It is by no means clear what ethics in the Gospel according to Matthew implies. Attending to four preliminary considerations should, therefore, help us get our topic into focus.

I. Preliminary Remarks

First, ethics in the Gospel of Matthew is neither the ethics of Matthew nor the ethics of Matthew's church, but the ethics of a particular text. (By "Matthew" I mean the author of this Gospel, whatever his or her name was.) The ethics of the Gospel of Matthew is not the ethics of Matthew himself, because it is unlikely that this text contains everything that the author would have wanted to say on the subject. What we have is a certain range of ethical matters which the evangelist regarded as important to address, and capable of being addressed, by writing up the Jesus tradition. What he dealt with were the problems of his community; what was not a problem he could leave alone. Therefore the ethics of this Gospel is not simply the ethics of the author.

For the same reason, the ethics of this Gospel is not a full statement of the ethics of Matthew's church. Every community develops a style, a set of customs and practices which are regarded as acceptable, and perhaps even mandatory. We may call that the ethos of the community—a network of habits, values, expectations and the like which give the community a profile. Most of the time the community's ethos is taken for granted. In this light the ethics of a community would be the rationale for the ethos, the reason people would give for the way they behaved and what they valued. However, an ethos becomes problematic when someone deviates enough from what is customary to generate a debate over what is the right thing to do. Then people begin giving reasons for their behavior, values, or expectations. Matthew's Gospel does not, in other words, deal with all aspects of behavior in Matthew's church, but

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only with those matters which have become problems. For instance, there is nothing in Matthew about intermarriage between Jewish and gentile Christians, the treatment of slaves, the worship of the emperor's genius, or whether Christians should participate in civic affairs—topics which were discussed by other Christians of the 1st and 2nd century. The range of matters dealt with by Matthew's Gospel does not represent all aspects of life about which Matthew's church made moral decisions, but it deals with those which had become problematic and controversial. This is why the ethics of the Gospel of Matthew is not simply the ethics of Matthew's church, but the church's ethics which the Evangelist deemed important to address.

So the first preliminary observation is that the ethics of the Gospel of Matthew is just that—the ethics of this text—a text written by an unidentified teacher for an unspecified, though particular, church.[1]

The *second* preliminary reflection has to do with the word ethics itself. It is far from clear whether Matthew himself would have understood what we are talking about, because strictly speaking, this Gospel does not have any ethics at all. There is of course more than one way to talk about ethics. But even if we take a very general understanding of ethics as disciplined, critical reflection on the norms of human behavior (the right, the good, the useful), it is clear that there is none of this in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew might have hoped that his book would prompt his readers to reflect on their behavior, but it is far more likely that what he really hoped for was eliciting a certain range of behavior, not critical thinking about it. So if we use the phrase "The Ethics of Matthew's Gospel" we do so in two senses: one is the general sense of ethics as that which has to do with moral life, and the other has to do with *our* critical reflection on what Matthew's Gospel says about it. We will not be able to keep these two uses of the term ethics apart very neatly.

The *third* preliminary remark grows out of the second and has to do with the nature of what Matthew wrote. Matthew wrote neither a book of ethics nor a manual of behavior; he wrote a story. This presents us with a certain set of difficulties which we need to identify at the outset. The story which Matthew wrote has no exact parallel in the New Testament, even if Matthew did use Mark. What is characteristic of Matthew is that he stops the action five times to let his protagonist make a speech, and each of the speeches is concerned with ethics in the ordinary, everyday sense. But the ethics of this Gospel is found not only in the five discourses delivered by Jesus; also the narrative material, with its short sayings and brief exchanges, is important to our topic. This presentation concentrates more on what Jesus says than on what he does, and so will be somewhat lopsided.

The *fourth* preliminary remark has to do with the design of this presentation. We shall explore certain motifs, themes, and dimensions of Matthew's moral counsel in order to get a general sense of the matter. We will first note

[1] I continue to think that this church was located in Antioch, on the Orontes River (then in Syria, now in Turkey).

four formative factors in order to see how Matthew thinks about the moral life and the standpoint from which he does so. Then we shall look at some major motifs that run through this Gospel, and finally conclude with some implications for our own thinking in the field of ethics.

II. Formative Factors

To begin with, the ethics of the Gospel of Matthew is not general ethics but specifically Christian ethics. To be more precise, the ethics of this gospel is not ethics as advocated by one who happens to be a Christian. Rather, Matthew's ethics is the ethics of a Christian who stands within the Christian community and who addresses the Christian community. Matthew did not write a story about Jesus for anyone whom it may concern nor did he write for the so-called religious readership in Antioch. He wrote within and for a particular Christian community. Paul Lehman's definition of Christian ethics actually fits Matthew's Gospel very well, as it does every other book in the New Testament: "Christian ethics, as a theological discipline, is the reflection upon the question, and its answer: What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ and as a member of the church, to do?"[2] The ethics of the Gospel of Matthew makes sense in the context of Christian faith and in the Christian community. This means that what counts for or against certain kinds of behavior does so because the community already has commitments. Matthew does not have to justify them because he shares them with his community. We think of convictions like the decisiveness of Jesus for humankind, that being a participant in the Christian community is important, that the Bible of the synagogue is not just the historical background of a movement but sacred scripture. In other words, the Lordship of Christ, the well-being of the church, the authority of scripture are norms to which he can appeal without having to justify doing so. Unless we see this at the outset, we may easily regard the ethics of this Gospel as arbitrary, heteronomous and legalistic, when actually Matthew shares with his readers a common commitment to the norms. They help define the contexts within which the moral issues emerged and with reference to which they must be resolved. To miss this would be to miss everything.

A *second* formative consideration has to do with the nature of the self, because generally ethics pertains not only to what is to be done but first of all to the doer and the doer's communities. To bring this into focus with regard to Matthew, it is useful to contrast this Gospel with Paul. (1) Matthew's Gospel shows no trace of Paul's understanding of sin as bondage. This Gospel assumes that the Christian self has made its commitment to Jesus Christ and to the gospel, but there is no hint that doing so has liberated the self from bondage to sin and death, as is the case for Paul. (2) Nor does Matthew's Gospel insist that the Christian self lives by the Spirit, as does Paul. Matthew's Gospel

[2]Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 25.

does not deny this, to be sure; but the empowering presence of the Spirit plays virtually no role in this text. (3) For the First Evangelist the Christian self can do what is expected. For this Gospel, the capacity of the will is unimpaired, and it does not appear to have become unimpaired or liberated by the Christ-event. It apparently never occurred to Matthew to think that the reason the law could not bring eternal life was that there was a frustrating power residing in the self which thwarts the law, a power which Paul called sin. (4) Although Matthew has a keen interest in the Christian doer as a member of the church, it does not occur to him that the church is what Paul calls the body of Christ, of which the Christian individual is a part like an arm or a leg. These remarks could easily be extended and should be, but perhaps enough has been said to show that for Matthew the nature of the self is neither a theological nor an ethical problem. What is a problem is the actions of the self. In other words, even though one must say that for Christian ethics generally the nature of the doer is as significant as what is to be done, this does not appear to be the case for ethics in this Gospel. As a formative consideration the nature of the doer is not a conscious factor. In comparison with Paul this simplifies Matthew's ethics considerably.

The *third* consideration concerns the actualities within Matthew's Christian community. Concretely it has to do with the tension between the absolutism of one strand of the Jesus tradition and the pressure to provide for some realities of life on the other. What I have in view is the social reality implied by what is usually discussed only in terms of literary sources; namely, Matthew's use of the sayings of Jesus tradition on which scholars have pinned the label Q. As I reflect on the matter, it seems that Matthew's use of Q involves much more than incorporating and rearranging one or more texts or traditions. Recent studies of Q are pointing to the likelihood that Q enshrines that strand of the Jesus tradition which was treasured by wandering charismatic teachers and preachers who advocated a rigorous, absolutist, uncompromising attitude on a range of matters of special interest to our topic.[3] Building on such studies, I believe that these persons, originally at home in the simpler setting of the Palestinian villages, arrived in the Christian community at a major metropolitan center, Antioch, where they disturbed the church's equilibrium. These, I believe, are the people to whom Matthew alludes in his parable of the weeds in the grainfield; that is, they are the ones who volunteered to weed out the church (Matt. 13:24-30). The way Matthew adopted and adapted their Jesus tradition, in other words, shows how he dealt not only with Q but with the people of Q. Matthew affirms their uncompromising stand, but

[3]It is Gerd Theissen who, more than anyone else, has pressed the hypothesis that the radical tradition of Jesus' sayings were used by the wandering charismatics at home in the villages of Palestine. See "Itinerant Radicalism: the Tradition of Jesus Sayings from the Perspective of the Sociology of Literature," *Radical Religion* II 2/3 (1975) 84-93 (orig. in *ZThK* 70 [1973] 245-71, with more ample notes); *The Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Theissen does not, however, concentrate his attention primarily on Q but finds the material scattered throughout the Synoptics.

surrounds it with other material which has the effect of moderating it. By incorporating Q, Matthew incorporated this group into the diversified, institutionalized church in the city. Also, by subordinating Q to the Markan gospel framework, Matthew made it clear that this group is not to dominate the entire community. By emphasizing the whole tradition, including the Q tradition brought by the prophets, Matthew produced not only a truly catholic gospel but one in which the work of the Spirit is firmly anchored in the institutional church. In other words, this Evangelist is not a mere collector and compiler of Jesus traditions, nor only a theologian. He is also an astute church diplomat who succeeded. Q, as a separate stream of tradition, disappeared,[4] and Matthew became the dominant Gospel of the church. The third formative factor in the ethics of this Gospel, then, concerns the political dynamics of Matthew's use of traditions in the context of his own church.

The *fourth* factor that forms this Gospel's ethics has to do with the tensions between Matthew's community and its parent from which it is estranged—the synagogue. Matthew produced his Gospel on this side of the rift between synagogue and church.[5] By Matthew's decade, Judaism was reconstituting itself after the destruction of Jerusalem, and both the Jewish and the Christian community were defining themselves over against each other. From the Christian side, this meant appealing to Jesus as the warrant for its own ethos. Consequently, Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' relation to Judaism is highly complex. We shall reflect on this Gospel's attitude toward the Torah in a moment, but what needs to be seen just now is that Matthew presents Jesus so bitterly at odds with the Pharisees because Jesus is the warrant for the community's own relation to the Jewish community. It is the church's conflict with the synagogue that has shaped Matthew's portrait of Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees. This gives the impression that, apart from the Torah (over which they disagreed), the two communities had nothing in common but mutual estrangement. But this is doubtless a misleading impression, for as noted, what the Gospel deals with are the problems, the pressure points. The common ground, which was probably quite extensive, simply does not appear. One of the major consequences of historical critical study of the gospels is the insight that Matthew's report of Jesus' polemic against the Pharisees tells us far more about Matthew's church than it does about Jesus

[4]There is no evidence to support Kurt Niederwimmer's assertion that Q "certainly was not lost 'accidentally' " but was deliberately suppressed. "Johannes Markus und die Frage nach dem Verfasser des zweiten Evangeliums, *ZNW* 58 (1967) 187.

[5]The rift between synagogue and church has received considerable attention in recent years, partly because clarifying the process in the first century is an important factor in Jewish-Christian relations in the twentieth, and partly because the momentum of critical inquiry posed this issue for both Matthew and John. Basic for the former is W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1964), and for the latter, the books by J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2d. rev. ed. 1979) and *The Gospel of John in Christian History* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). The influence of Martyn's work can be seen in Raymond E. Brown's *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

himself, and that the ethics of this Gospel is shaped by the polemic at almost every point.

In summary, the ethics of the Gospel of Matthew is shaped by four factors: (1) fundamental commitment to Jesus Christ and participation in the Christian community; (2) a rather uncomplicated understanding of the nature of the Christian self, in contrast with Paul; (3) the internal dynamics of Matthew's community; (4) the growing hostility between Matthew's Christian community and the Jewish community. With these considerations in mind, we can now turn to major motifs in the ethics of the Gospel of Matthew.

III. Major Motifs

Since Matthew's Gospel neither defines nor discusses common themes of ethics like the good, the nature of justice, or what is useful for the common good, our search for major motifs will take us in a different direction. The four motifs which I want to sketch concern discipleship, the master image, the will of God in the Torah, and accountability.

First, *discipleship.* To orient ourselves to this motif, it is useful to ask, How is the doer related to the norm of behavior? In a word, for this Gospel the norm is Jesus who is the model, not the ideal. Matthew's word for the proper relationship to the normative model is discipleship. Jesus is not the ideal Christ, a moral absolute who is a perfect paragon of virtue which one can and should aspire to emulate. Matthew does not regard Jesus as the perfect person. If he did, he would urge his readers to be like Jesus because Jesus is humanity perfected, because Jesus embodies the ideal man, the idea of a person.[6] But Matthew is not interested in Jesus as a flawless, perfect ideal. It is not moral perfection that makes Jesus the mandatory norm but the office which he occupies by virtue of his unique birth, on the one hand, and his resurrection on the other.

This becomes clear at the conclusion of this Gospel. Here the Risen One meets his disciples and says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... [and] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...." Grammatically there is one imperative verb here: "Make disciples." This has two components. One is incorporation into the Christian community by means of baptism, the other is instruction to do everything that Jesus commanded. Our concern is with the second.

[6]So Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* p. 384. A century later, a distinguished American pastor, Newman Smythe, made the same sort of point when he wrote of "the historical realization of the divine idea of man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth." Quoted by James Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 156. As Gustafson points out, such a view of Jesus produces an ethic of ends, and the Christian life becomes a matter of striving to achieve the ideal, the summon bonum (p. 157). Where this occurs, one might add, an ideal Christ relates to the self as law not as gospel, as obligation not as opportunity.

At first, it appears that the text has in view the imperatives of Jesus in this Gospel. Yet the primary command here is to make disciples, followers, and this points no less to the narrative parts of the Gospel, to reports of what Jesus did, to the deeds regarded as paradigms. Matthew understands his community to be the result of this discipling activity. The disciples of Jesus are not to gain disciples for themselves but for the Risen One; they are actually forbidden to have their own followers: "You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren....Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ" (23:9-10). Jesus is the norm because God has entrusted to him cosmic authority; the resurrection has installed him into an office which is virtually that of God's regent. Jesus' post-resurrection authority is not new, of course, for already during his lifetime he declared, "All things have been delivered to me by my Father" (11:27). For our theme, it is important to see that for Matthew Jesus is not merely a new lawgiver but the lawgiver whose own life calls persons to follow him. This means that Jesus himself is not extrinsic to the moral obligations, as if he were simply divinely authorized to issue decrees. Rather Jesus himself is intrinsic to the obligation. The christological ground of ethics is clear; consequently, the theme of discipleship pervades this account of Jesus in the past and is also confirmed for the future.

It would be a mistake, however, to read this concern for discipleship in a pietistic way, one which emphasizes that the Christian is to imitate Jesus in everything, to duplicate him as if he were a stencil. Indeed, as I read this Gospel, Matthew was struggling against just such a mentality, represented by the absolutist charismatic prophets who wandered, homeless, as did Jesus. Concerning this point, Kingsbury rightly rejects Eduard Schweizer's view that "Matthew's community comprised a group of Christians who, living in the border regions of Galilee and Syria, construed Jesus' call to discipleship in literal terms and, divesting themselves of familiar ties and worldly goods, embarked upon a life 'parallel' to his, viz., that of the wandering, charismatic prophet."[7] Matthew's was actually a relatively well-to-do city church,[8] concerned for order and due process in discipline. The absolutist sayings of Jesus, as already noted, were treasured by the charismatics who arrived in Antioch. Just as Matthew affirms the absolutist ethics of the wandering prophets, so he handles the Jesus tradition as a whole in such a way as to adapt it to his wealthier, urban community. Thereby he affirmed the importance of being a committed community while at the same time he showed that this did not mean simply repeating Jesus. As a whole, Matthew's Gospel showed the church how to be faithful disciples in new situations.

[7]Jack Dean Kingsbury, "The Verb *Akolouthein* ("To Follow") as an Index of Matthew's View of his Community," *JBL* 97 (1978) 56-73; the quotation given in Kingsbury's summary of Schweizer's often-repeated view in *Matthäus und seine Gemeinde.* Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 71. (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk Verlag, 1974).

[8]The evidence for this is well-presented by Kingsbury, "The Verb *Akolouthein*," pp. 66-68.

We can see this in two concrete matters—wealth and divorce. We will look at both, beginning with wealth. The radical Q tradition included the Beatitudes in a form closer to that now in Luke than in Matthew. Moreover, in Luke the Beatitudes are followed by woes, thus giving a pattern of blessing and curse. In Luke both the blessings and the curses are addressed to particular hearers: "Blessed are you poor and hungry, you who weep and who are hated; but woe to you who are rich, who are full, who laugh now and you whom people praise." Both groups will have their situations reversed by the coming of the kingdom. Matthew rewrote all this rather drastically.[9] He dropped the woes altogether; he added other beatitudes thereby expanding the circle of those who are blessed; and he changed the "blessed are you" to "blessed are they." Above all, he provided the beatitudes with a new setting—he made them the opening sentences of Jesus' programmatic discourse, the Sermon on the Mount. Instead of promising the Kingdom to the poor, Matthew has Jesus announce that the Kingdom is for anyone whose spirit is poor; instead of promising the hungry that they will be satisfied, Matthew has Jesus promise satisfaction to those whose hunger is for rectitude before God. Matthew is often accused of "spiritualizing" the Beatitudes, but this is not really correct. What he has done is to broaden their horizons and make the blessing of the kingdom accessible to a wider range of persons than the literally poor and hungry.

With regard to divorce, Matthew is clearly interested in this matter because he deals with it twice, once in the Sermon on the Mount (where he used Q; 5:31-32), and once again in chap. 19, where he rewrote Mark (19:3-12). In both cases, he modifies the absolute prohibition of divorce by allowing for an exception, usually regarded as infidelity, though the meaning of the word is not clear.[10] In any case, Matthew allows for an exception to the rule, and thereby he adjusts the rigorism of the tradition to new circumstances.

These two examples show that for Matthew, being a disciple and doing what Jesus commanded is not simply a matter of literal compliance with a set of rules but of obedience with integrity. Matthew appears to be more in-

[9]It will not escape careful students of the texts who are also conversant with the critical issues that I am simplifying matters considerably. For example, it might well be that Matthew did not "rewrite" a text of Q like that in Luke which the prophets had brought; perhaps an alternate form had already established itself in Antioch, one whose structure and wording were already moving toward what we now have in Matthew. Even if that were the case, it would but adjust, not disqualify, the point I am making—that what Matthew put into his Gospel was not the radical form of the Beatitudes which was taken up by Luke. If this more radical form had been brought to Antioch by the absolutists, then whether Matthew rewrote it or rejected it in favor of a form like that now in his Gospel does not really matter for the result is the same: the Matthean form prevailed, deliberately.

[10]The literature on these texts is enormous, partly because the exact meaning in this context of *porneia* (usually rendered "adultery" or "fornication") is not clear. Another possibility is that the word refers to illicit marriage within the degrees of kinship prohibited in Lev. 18:6-18. This has been advocated recently by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Matthean Divorce Texts and some New Palestinian Evidence," *To Advance the Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 79-111 (orig. pub. *TS* 37 [1976] 197-226.

terested in being consonant with Jesus than with being literally compliant. This is because he reckons with the fact that to be a disciple at the end of the 1st century in Antioch is to be a disciple in a quite different situation from that of the original circle around Jesus. The clearest sign that Matthew reckons with this difference is the fact that in Matthew 10 Jesus sends the disciples out on a mission and commands them to do what he had been doing, and forbids them to go to anyone but the Jews. But the Risen Lord commands them to go to all the world, but does not command them to engage in healing and exorcism.[11]

Thus there is a certain ambiguity in Matthew's understanding of discipleship. The disciple is to do everything that Jesus commanded including what he did as mandatory paradigms; yet one is not called on to be literalistic in appropriating the model. Matthew does not hesitate to adjust the tradition in order to accommodate it to a new situation. This appears rather strange to us, until we reflect on the fact that for Matthew the content of the name "Jesus" is no longer limited to what the Galilean had said and done, but now includes what the living, resurrected, enthroned Jesus as Son of Man is doing in the present. Precisely the unlimited authority of the Resurrected One liberates the disciple from a slavish imitation of the pre-resurrection Jesus, while at the same time it makes Jesus the ultimate paradigm. But paradigm of what? This brings us to our second motif—the master image.

A *master image* is an embracing metaphor which overarches all other images and metaphors. It is the controlling term, the hub to which the different spokes are joined. A master image is not a concept, because concepts can be defined. An image does not ask so much for definition as for concretion. A concept toward the abstract, a master image appeals to the whole self because it stimulates the imagination. A concept presses for precision and tries to eliminate ambiguity but a master image incorporates ambiguity and tension. A concept is at home in denotative discourse, a master image is at home in connotative speech and in evocative language.

The Kingdom of Heaven is an image, a metaphor, a picture of reality, and its dominant role in this text justifies calling it a master image. The Kingdom of Heaven is never defined or analyzed; we learn its content by attending to contexts in which it appears, rather than by analyzing its semantic origins or its logical structure. The Kingdom of Heaven is not a thing to be analyzed but a picture which mediates reality in an imagination-stirring way. Intimately related, in Matthew's Gospel, to the Kingdom is righteousness.[12] Righteousness is not simply goodness. Rather it is rightness—the rightness attained by obeying the Torah as Jesus interpreted and exemplified it. Righteousness prevails where everything is right and rightly related to everything else. Righteousness, in other words, is a way of expressing the moral ecology of the

[11]Kingsbury, "The Verb *Akolouthein*," pp. 69f. has seen this, too.

[12]For a convenient, brief overview of "righteousness" in Matthew's Gospel, see John Reumann, *Righteousness in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress/New York: Paulist Press, 1982), pp. 124-35, where the important literature is cited.

Kingdom of Heaven. Where God's kingship is fully effective, there all things are right. Matthew's ethics is not concerned to identify highest good, the summum bonum, nor to discern a single fundamental principle or axiom; these common categories of ethics and moral discourse are usually oriented to human ends even though they can be grounded in the transcendant reality called God. But when the master image is the Kingdom of Heaven, our attention is shifted to a pattern of right relationships in a field of force, to the Creator's domain in which rightness prevails. The consequence of this shift for ethics deserves to be explored.

Underneath Matthew's various statements lies an unstated assumption which he shares with much of Semitic antiquity; namely, the view that the End will be like the Beginning, that final time will be like primal time. This assumption explains why the coming of the Kingdom brings with it a restoration of the original state of affairs. This is neither stated nor developed in a systematic or comprehensive way in Matthew's Gospel, but it appears in the theme that the eschatological righteousness of the coming Kingdom is consonant with creation. We see this in Jesus' reply to the question about divorce (19:3-8): "Have you not read that he who made them [man and woman] from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one'? No human should separate what God has united." When the Pharisees ask, "Why then did Moses provide regulations for divorce?", Jesus replies again that this was a concession to human hard-heartedness, "but from the beginning it was not so." In other words, Jesus the proclaimer and bearer of the Kingdom appeals to the original order of things in creation. The righteousness of the Kingdom is not what appears to be the equitable thing to do, given conflicting claims to justice in the present, but rather the right state of affairs at the End which corresponds to the Beginning. In other words, Matthew's ethics is teleological, not in the sense of human needs and goals but of the telos, the goal and end of God's work—restoration of creation.

This casts light on that theme which has vexed so many students of Jesus and the gospels: eschatology and ethics. No one forced this issue more than Albert Schweitzer, who argued that Jesus' ethics and demands were actually emergency measures for the brief time remaining before the Kingdom came; they are "interim ethics." On the other hand, scholars have pointed out that many of Jesus' ethical demands are not related to the coming of the Kingdom, at least not explicitly. The warrant for a certain action is not that the Kingdom is near but that it is the right thing to do, such as turning the other cheek, loving the enemy, or the Golden Rule. Scholars have debated which type of ethics is dominant, the eschatological or the non-eschatological. The question is misplaced, because the standard of right in the coming kingdom is what has been right ever since the beginning, for the God whose Kingdom is coming is the Creator.

If the Kingdom and its rightness restores creation, or to put it more

abstractly, if the final norm coincides with the primal state, if teleology and protology agree, then this implies that something in between has gone wrong which the Creator is correcting. But if Matthew does not seem to think that all creation is in bondage to sin and death as did Paul, then what has gone wrong results primarily from the human aspect of creation. But if, as we also saw, Matthew does not think that the human will or human nature have been enslaved so that they need liberation, then what needs correcting is not human existence but history: the legacy of the past which shapes who people are, what they do and expect, and the way they relate to the Creator. Matthew does not write about history in general, but has in view a particular history which has shaped his community, and that of Jesus the paradigm. That is, he has in view the history of Israel; concretely, the distortion he has in view is particularized in Judaism as he sees it. And this brings us to the next motif.

The *third* motif concerns the relation between *the will of God in the Kingdom* and *the will of God in the Torah,* the paramount norm for Judaism. Given the polemic between Matthew and the synagogue, it is only natural that Matthew's view of Judaism, represented by the Pharisees, would not coincide with Judaism's view of itself. For just this reason, it is useful to remind ourselves that for the synagogue, God's will had a written form in Scripture, and an oral form in the tradition handed on from teacher to teacher. For Pharisaic Judaism, both were Torah. Furthermore, for Judaism Torah was also consonant with God's primal will in creation. To be successful and credible, then, Matthew's polemic against Judaism must drive a wedge between written and oral Torah; otherwise, in criticizing Judaism he would end up criticizing Scripture and the norms of the Kingdom would be pitted against Scripture and creation. So Matthew agrees with his opponents in the synagogue that the will of God is found in Scripture and that this accords with the primal will of God. But this means that in order to criticize his opponents he must show that the oral tradition on which the synagogue relies is in fact a distortion, precisely the distortion which Jesus, the norm of the Kingdom, overcomes. To show that, he must present Jesus as the one who expounds and exemplifies what is real obedience to God's will in creation and in Torah. That is why Matthew's Jesus is the definitive interpreter of the Torah. There is a second strategy which Matthew uses; namely, accusing the Pharisees of failing to do what they claim is to be done. Matthew's word for this is hypocrisy—the gulf between word and deed. Many matters which we commonly associate with ethics Matthew deals with in connection with one or the other of these strategies, though this essay limits itself to the former.

Matthew shows Jesus to be on the side of the Torah in such a way that the opponents are put in the position of misconstruing the will of God. In Matt. 5:17-20 Jesus declares, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." He goes on to say that not even the smallest item in the written Torah will pass before it is all fulfilled, and he criticizes those who say otherwise. Finally, Jesus says,

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven." Clearly the ethics of Jesus, as Matthew portrays it, is an ethic of the Torah but not of the scribes and Pharisees, even though they too claim the Torah. The so-called "antitheses," each beginning with "You have heard that it was said" (or some variation of it) come next, and the whole series ends with the astounding requirement: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect" (5:21-48). Since the scribes and Pharisees were committed to punctilious observance of the Torah, and had developed the oral tradition as a way of specifying in detail how the Torah-ethic was to be carried out, it might appear that Jesus is asking for an even more rigorous and conscientious observance of the law.

But a closer look at the "antitheses" shows that this is not the perfection Matthew has in mind. The developing oral tradition of the Pharisees specified what was required so that one could know whether one obeyed or not, or even disobeyed unwittingly. Instead of refining the specifications of transgression even more, or instead of demanding even additional obligations, Matthew has Jesus rupture the entire juridical approach to morality (5:21-26). Thus Jesus has no quarrel with the tradition as such, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment." Not a word is said against this. Instead, Matthew has Jesus shift the focus from murder and its punishment (judgment) to the punishment of those who do not murder at all. Why? Because those who do not murder can all too easily think that they will not come into judgment, that they are on the right side of the law. But who is it who actually comes into judgment? "Everyone who is angry with his brother." There are no escapees from judgment. That Jesus destroys the juridical approach to morality is clear from how the next saying continues the paragraph: Whoever insults the brother with a term of abuse (*Raca*) is liable to the council, and whoever calls him a fool is liable to hellfire. The three offenses—anger, insult, and calling him a fool—are more or less the same offense, but the punishment is not the same: judgment, council, hellfire.[13] In other words, there is no correlation between offense and punishment. The ascending scale of punishment does not fit the crime, something which every legal ethic assumes must be the case. What is going on here? Simply this: Matthew shows Jesus to be making it impossible for a person to use the law by calculating what we today call the cost-benefit ratio. No one can say, I am not in a precarious position vis-à-vis the will of God because I have not violated this or that prohibition. Guilt is assumed.

That Matthew has his eye on the assumed guilt of the hearer of the law is clear from the way the first antithesis continues—if you are bringing a gift to

[13]The difficulties of determining the exact meaning of *krisin* (judgment) are well-known to exegetes: does it refer to a local court (so that there is an ascending scale of consequences), or does it refer to *the* (last) judgment (so that "sanhedrin" stands between two final consequences)? Either way, the point being made here is valid—the non-correlation between degree of offense and degree of consequence. This has been noted also by Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), pp. 188, 240.

the altar and "remember that your brother has something against you...." That is, if you remember that you are the offender, go be reconciled first, and then come with your gift for God. According to the flow of thought in this paragraph, God's will is not simply that murderers and other offenders be punished, but that there be reconciliation. Only then is the gift to God acceptable, because only then are things right between persons and between persons and God. That is what the surpassing righteousness is all about. The perfection which Jesus is said to require is not Greek flawlessness of an ideal or a consummate constellation of virtues, but moral integrity, wholeness.

Likewise the next antithesis about adultery makes it impossible for the hearer to claim innocence (5:27-30). The question, at what point does the relation become adultery and at what point is it not yet that serious? simply cannot arise if it is the case that everyone who lusts has already committed adultery in the heart, even without body contact. In other words, the righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is really a different kind of righteousness because it has a different origin: response to the message of the Kingdom. The entire Sermon on the Mount is to be understood, not as Jesus' legislation for morality, but as a series of concretions of what a proper response to the news of the Kingdom entails. This is why Matthew placed the Sermon as the first instance of Jesus' preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom (4:23).

Another way Matthew puts Jesus on the side of the Torah is to have him criticize the oral Torah. This is especially clear in the way Matthew handles Mark 7, the long discussion of what makes a person ritually impure (Matt. 15:1-20). We cannot analyze here this complex collection of sayings. It must suffice to note several things. (1) Matthew repeats the Markan accusation that the Pharisees end up transgressing the written commandment because they cling to the oral tradition which has grown up around it (Mk 7:9; Mt. 15:3). (2) Although Matthew repeats the Markan statement that it is not what goes into a person's mouth that makes one impure before God but what comes out, Matthew omits Mark's comment that thereby Jesus "declared all foods clean" (Mk 7:19), because Matthew refuses to concede that Jesus abolished the Jewish food laws altogether. Thus Matthew tries to make sure that Jesus cannot be accused of violating his own claim that he did not come to abolish the law. In a similar way, the Markan story of the disciples in the grainfields, where they picked ears of grain on the sabbath, is edited by Matthew to show that they are not guilty of breaking the law (Mk 2:23-28; Matt. 12:1-8).

To sum up, Matthew does not regard Jesus' ethic (and thereby his own as well) as a new ethic at all, but as the recovery of what has been God's will all along, and which should have been recognized as such. Jesus' ethic is neither a strange import nor a novelty but the recovered original. As Matthew portrays it, Jesus' teaching is so radically different because the distortion of God's will has been so pervasive. That in making this point Matthew himself has distorted Judaism is clear to us, even though it was not clear to him.

The *fourth* motif in Matthew concerns *accountability.* There is a great emphasis on this motif, but what may surprise us is that virtually none of it concerns accountability to one another. Probably the only significant interest in mutual accountability appears in chap. 18, where we have procedures for disciplining the wayward believer. The prevailing line of accountability is rather between the Christian self and the Lord. Even the summary of the law, the double command of love toward God and toward neighbor is not portrayed as having any right to receive this love; moreover, it is not the neighbor's needs that call for this love but the inherent unity of love for God and love for persons. Nor is there the slightest hint that the Christian self is accountable to society for the way one uses wealth, educates children, earns a living, treats slaves, participates in public life, or ameliorates the lot of the poor. Almsgiving is taken for granted but there is no interest in the recipient, only in whether the giver is willing to give without earning approbation from others (Matt. 6:24). The impulse for charitable deeds does not come *to* the self from the environment but from within. The call to let one's light shine so that people may see the good works is not motivated by the beneficial consequences; rather, the aim of letting the light be seen is that people will glorify God.[14] The peacemakers are not blessed because of the peace but because this is what makes them God's children.

It is true, of course, that Matthew portrays Jesus as responding to human need. This note is struck as part of the lead-in to the Sermon on the Mount (4:24), and is portrayed in the cycle of stories that follow it in chaps. 8—9 as well. Above all, it is seen in Jesus' sending out the twelve: "when he saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). But even here, the overarching motive seems to be a sense of urgency to get the word out, for Jesus tells the disciples that if anyone does not receive them, they are to move on (10:14), and those who reject them will fare worse than Sodom and Gomorrah. Even if Jesus is portrayed as responding to human need, and even if the Christian is to be a follower of Jesus, the paradigm of righteousness, the fact remains that the Great Commission, we recall, says not a word about healing, exorcism, or deeds of compassion as part of the Christian mission.[15]

In light of what we have observed about this Gospel as a whole, it comes as something of a surprise to read the parable of the Last Judgment, where the sole criterion for determining whether one is sent to eternal fire or to the Kingdom is whether one has fed the hungry, given water to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and the imprisoned (25:31-46). Here not a word is said about having made a confession of faith.

[14]Matt. 5:16. In 15:3-4 Matthew shows how Jesus fulfills this teaching.

[15]In Matt. 10:8, interestingly, the disciples are commissioned to do precisely these things. Since this chapter reflects church practice, one is induced to ask whether Matthew deliberately differentiated the activity before Easter from that afterwards, just as he changed the range of beneficiaries. This topic cannot be discussed here.

Indeed, according to this parable, these deeds of mercy were really done to the Judge, who was present incognito, among the needy. This parable has many layers of meaning, but surely one of them is that the condemned would have done all these things for Jesus if only they had known he was among the poor.[16] That is, they would have been religious in terms of doing things for God, but they were not religious in the sense of doing something for the needy. The righteous, on the other hand, responded to the needy without knowing or caring whether Jesus was the ultimate recipient of their good deeds. It is only at the last judgment that everything is made clear. The righteous discover that the Judge does reward their almsgiving which was not calculated to earn a reward.

In other words, Matthew's ethic is anything but prudential. The good is to be done not because one calculates its benefits, whether for the self or for the common good of all. The good is to be done because this accords with the heavenly Father's will and character. There is no place in Matthew's ethics for calculating which course of action is better in the long run, which has the fewest unwanted results, which benefits most people to the greater extent and which harms fewest. Consequently, there is no accountability for public consequences either. All concentration is on the doer and his or her righteous deeds.

How do we explain this? For one thing, our expectations are largely out of place and anachronistic with regard to Matthew. It is wrong to read our understanding of responsibility for public life and common good back into first century Antioch. Not until the emergence of the democratic idea, and the notion of the citizen in our sense, was our understanding of public good thinkable. In Matthew's Antioch, public affairs and the common wealth were in the hands of the aristocracy, and the empire as a whole operated more like a network of plantations than a series of town meetings in Vermont. The clusters of house churches that made up Matthew's church has no access to or responsibility for such matters. In the second place, the material which Matthew had at his disposal must be reckoned with. Much of it, as we saw, came from the Christian prophets who emphasized those radical elements in Jesus' teaching which called for unreserved response to the Kingdom. This material had about it a sense of crisis for the hearer, and was not interested in reflecting on the impact which those who responded might have on society. If anything, the interest was in the opposite—the reaction of society to the emergence of persons who are social deviants, and who therefore are harassed and persecuted. Matthew is much more interested in how Christians respond to persecution because that relation to society and its power structures is what he knew best.

Thus far we have reflected on the theme of accountability where we today might hope to find it but do not. Now we must discuss this theme where we might wish we did not find it in Matthew but do; namely, in conjunction with the Last Judgment. The theme of the Last Judgment for everyone, including

[16]It is possible, of course, that Matthew understood the recipients of these deeds of mercy to be the Christian missionaries, not the poor in general.

the Christian, dominates this Gospel. Each of the five major discourses of Jesus ends on the theme of judgment, and the last discourse is devoted entirely to the End of things, leading up to the Judgment. Moreover, each of the discourses (apart from chap. 23, which is addressed to the Pharisees) is addressed to the Christian community. At the same time, Matthew is not urging Christians to be excited about the nearness of the End; rather he is urging them to be ready whenever it might come (Matt. 24:36-51). So it is not the nearness of the End that makes the theme of the Last Judgment so important but its inevitability.

The motif of the Judgment ahead has two functions. One of them is to deprive Christians, especially charismatic wonderworkers, of their sense of security. This is clearly the force of the saying, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord' did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, I never knew you...." (7:21-23). A more startling repudiation is hard to imagine. When we read this alongside the parable of the Last Judgment, it is clear that no one is sure how it will all come out. Those who did not know they were doing deeds of mercy for Christ will be surprised, and those who knew exactly that they were doing them in the Lord's name will be just as surprised. The other function of the Judgment theme is to underscore the disciples' accountability to the Lord. This is why Matthew shows little interest in how others fare in the Judgment.

The motif of the Last Judgment is not a common one in ethics. For one thing, it is too mythological. More important, it appears to fly in the face of a conviction that virtue should be its own reward, whereas the Judgment theme implies an extrinsic reward for doing the good, the right, or the just. We are convinced that one should do the good and the right because they are good and right, not because it pays on Judgment Day. Matthew has no real quarrel with this, for, as we already noted, there are materials in this Gospel which commend a course of action simply because that accords with creation or with the character of the Creator. Nonetheless, alongside such sayings of Jesus and overarching the whole is the theme of Judgment, which includes the theme of reward. Because Matthew does not write ethics he does not explain how all this coheres. So we are left to our inferences.

For one thing, it is clear that Matthew does not conceive of God as the Great Bookkeeper who sees to it that everyone gets his or her due. This is clear from the last of the antitheses, which requires precisely the opposite of retaliation to the enemy because God sends rain and sunshine on just and unjust alike (5:43-48). Tit-for-tat is precisely not the name of God's game. This is also why Jesus insists that he did not come to call the righteous but sinners, and why Jesus requires that the forgiven in turn forgive. In the second place, we must not separate retribution for evil from reward for good, as if one could affirm

the latter but reject the former. If the merciful shall obtain mercy, the judgmental will receive judgment. "With the judgment you pronounce you will be judged" (7:1). On the surface, this appears to be a flat contradiction to the assertion that the unjust get the same rain as the just. In terms of logical coherence, Matthew combines statements which simply will not meld into an integrated position. In the third place, the function of these statements may be put this way: when Matthew wants to emphasize the grace of God he has Jesus speak about the disparity between human action and divine response. One does not get what one deserves because God is gracious. But when Matthew wants to emphasize the seriousness of human action he has Jesus speak about God's response to what one does. In other words, the recompense and reward statements function as secondary warrants for a course of action—they signal the seriousness of the human deed lest one take God's mercy for granted. The note of recompense, which is inherent in the theme of the Last Judgment, serves to underline the view that God takes the doer and the doer's deeds with real seriousness, so that one cannot calculate in advance just where one will stand. In the last analysis, Matthew's treatment of the last Judgment theme embodies the major issues in the dialectic of law and gospel.

IV. Conclusion

What does Matthew's Gospel have to teach us about our own ethics, our own reflection on the nature of Christian existence and its concretions in day-to-day life?

First, the logical tensions between various elements of Matthew's gospel should not be smoothed out but be allowed to remain, for in the last analysis they are not weaknesses like a structural flaw in a building, but a strength like dissonant notes in music. It is precisely the logical instability of the text which prevents an ideological position from forming permanently, on the one hand, and which, on the other, makes it possible for different parts of the text to emerge with special power from one situation to the next. For those who take Matthew's Gospel seriously, it is just this internal tension that keeps its ethics in solution, and which lures the reader into ongoing reflection and discernment.

Second, in coping with charismatic absolutists who claim the right to speak the Lord's Judgment now, Matthew does not deny them the right to do so nor does he deny the absolute claims of the kingdom on the believer, but he does insist that the church is built on Peter, not on the Spirit (16:13-20), just as he insists that the church is not a pure community (13:47-50). Matthew institutionalizes the charismatics by incorporating their tradition into an institution-oriented Gospel. One might ask, however, whether the church's problem today is the same as in Matthew's time or whether it might be the opposite, so that the task might be to release the uncompromising demands of the Kingdom into an over-institutionalized church. Perhaps both are needed, depending on

where one is. The point is, how one stands with regard to this question will determine whether we read Matthew with the grain or against it, with the absolutists.

Third, Matthew is serious about the moral life, yet he approaches it with categories and motifs which may be strange to us—discipleship instead of ethical ideals; a master image instead of a summum bonum; a concern for the will of God in Torah rather than for what is best for the most; and the accountability of each Christian to the Lord. It is easy to call attention to the many categories and motifs of ethical discourse, as we have come to know it, which are absent from Matthew's Gospel. What is not so easy is to say that this is a significant limitation. One might at least ask whether, in light of this Gospel, our usual modes of ethical discourse are as self-evident or as adequate as we assumed. If Matthew's text can generate such a self-critical reflection in us, it might prove to be more significant for our ethics than we expect.