Matthew as a Church Manual

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THE earliest Christians expected the second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of this present world-age to occur at any time. Furthermore, there was a theory of the dependence of the church as well as individuals upon the Holy Spirit for guidance. Consequently, at first there was no need for church organization, no need for institutionalism and ecclesiasticism. However, before long, with the delay of the second coming, the need for some kind of organization, quite simple in its beginnings, arose. Paul, for example, testifies to the existence of some kind of control by the original Jerusalem group, in fact, he agreed to collect funds towards their support. His basic objection was not to the need of leadership, but to the reluctance of the leaders to accept him as one of their equals.

Along with this development, it no doubt become increasingly necessary to provide some instruction for those who became members of the new movement. This became more essential as the sect began to divorce itself from Judaism, becoming more and more composed of converts from the Gentile world. Such instruction no doubt was given by the missionaries as they founded churches among the Gentiles. But when a missionary left a newly founded church for another field of activity, he may have found it advisable to provide the church with brief written instructions either before he left or, as was the case with Paul, by correspondence. Indeed, it may have been the practice of the missionary's superiors or sponsoring church to provide him with instructions, either orally or in writing.

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Although Paul stayed with the newly founded church at Corinth for a period of some eighteen months, after he left Corinth for Ephesus he found it necessary to give instructions in writing. For, as we well know, he received a letter (I Cor. 7:1) from the church which contained inquiries concerning basic matters of Christian belief and behavior. In part this was in answer to a letter he had previously written to them (I Cor. 5:9). In addition, he had received oral reports concerning the situation in the church. Accordingly, he wrote I Corinthians giving instructions concerning what a Christian should believe and how he should conduct himself. He considered such matters as divisions in the church, marriage, divorce, the status of children, baptism, the Lord's Supper, worship, speaking with tongues, the place of women, idolatry, dietary rules, the resurrection, the second coming, moral behavior, the collection for the Jerusalem church, and other pressing matters.

This letter, although designed for a given time and place, not only served as a guide for the church at Corinth, but there is evidence that it circulated by itself before the Pauline corpus of letters was assembled and published, being used by churches (such as Rome) as well as by the church at Corinth as a guide. In other words, written originally as a letter, functionally it apparently was used as a sort of church manual.

Actually, before long a book that was a church manual appeared, possibly in the neighborhood of Antioch in Syria sometime after the beginning of the second century. This was the so-called Didache (Teaching), described as the teaching of the Lord to the heathen by the twelve apostles. That is, it professedly contains the teachings of Jesus

mediated to the Gentile churches by the apostles. It became the first of a number of formal church manuals, some of which incorporated it in their much longer texts. Also, it was in such high favor that there were those who considered it to be scripture. And why not? For it claimed to be of apostolic origin, claimed to be the words of Jesus himself, though, of course, it was not a gospel in the accepted use of the term. However, though it contains no account of the deeds of Jesus, it has as much right to be called a gospel as the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas, which likewise contains teachings of Jesus and no deeds at all.

The first and probably oldest part of this manual develops the concept of two ways, one of life, the other of death, the one the way of ethical, moral, Christian living, the other the way of unethical, immoral, non-Christian living. This section was apparently designed for the instruction of those about to be baptized as Christians. This is followed by instructions largely ecclesiastical in character, concerning b a p t i s m, the Lord's Supper, fasting, prayer, charity, the treatment to be accorded visiting Christians, especially prophets, support of the clergy, the worship service on the Lord's Day, church officials. It concludes with an apocalyptic prediction of the second coming of Christ similar to the little apocalypse of the synoptic Gospels.

There is an increasing trend towards the belief that the Gospels are not primarily historical and biographical in purpose, but religious. It is generally considered that Luke-Acts is an apology for Christianity composed towards the end of the first century when tensions were increasing between Christianity and the Roman authorities. It has been suggested that John is also a kind of apology. Moule represents this school of thought, observing that it was "written to the pagan 'Gnostic' who had heard about Jesus but was misunderstanding him, and perhaps still more to the non-Christian Jew," rather than being primarily intended for the full believer.[1] Mark, quite possibly the first Gospel to be written, may have been composed as a martyrology, designed to induce the followers of Jesus to imitate his heroic martyr death, taking up the cross and suffering death as he has done if necessary.

Matthew, of course, is as much a gospel as the other three, giving an account of the deeds and words of Jesus. To this extent it is a biography. However, it may have had another quite practical purpose. Moule has observed that a large amount of its material "would be suitable for pastoral instruction in a Christian community." [2]

At the very beginning of his introduction to Matthew in **The Interpreter's Bible** Johnson states: "When a convert to Christianity in the late first century or early second century read the Gospel according to Matthew for the first time, he read it as a manual of membership, rather than as a part of his Bible."

Consequently, it may be suggested that Matthew, although a Gospel in form, is, like the Didache, an early church manual in function. It may have been written in Antioch, probably towards the end of the first century. Antioch may have been the first large Gentile city to have a Christian church within its boundaries. It was here, according to Acts, that the Greek name Christian was first given to the early followers of Jesus. It is thought that its membership was mixed, being composed of converts from both the Jewish and the Gentile worlds. It seemingly was an early headquarters of Christian missionary activity. We learn that its leaders selected Barnabas and Paul (Saul), fasted and prayed with them, laid their hands on them and sent them out as missionaries (Acts 13:1-3.) Mac-

[1] "The Intention of the Evangelists," in *New Testament Essays,* ed. by A. J. B. Higgins (1959), p. 168.
[2] *Ibid.,* p. 168.

Gregor in his commentary on Acts in **The Interpreter's Bible** observes, and quite correctly, that the proposed missionary tour "was not just a private enterprise undertaken by Barnabas and Paul. The church as such was standing by their work, had solemnly commissioned them, and was sending them out as its representatives." May it also be suggested that the church not only may have given the two some financial assistance, but that in addition it gave them instructions (orally, probably, not written) for their missionary activities as well, aspecially since one of them, Paul, was somewhat on trial, so to speak? To be sure, it was expected that they would be guided by the Holy Spirit, but was this guidance thought to have been sufficient?

If such instructions were provided, they might well have included advice for their new converts as well as for the missionaries themselves. In time written manuals may have been prepared to take the place of the oral instructions. If so, it is not impossible that Matthew (presumably composed in Antioch, an early missionary center) was designed to be a manual of this type, using the previously established gospel form as literary vehicle for this purpose, with the words of instruction being attributed to Jesus for their sanction and authority.

In this connection it is usually stated that Matthew is the ecclesiastical gospel, not merely because it is the only one to use the word "church" (16:18; 18:17), but more because, as Johnson remarks, "whether by conscious design or not, Matthew in every way met the needs of church life." This may be an over-statement of the case, but it is evident that for the author the words of Jesus constituted a new code of righteousness, which, if it did not supersede and replace the so-called law of Moses, at any rate it supplemented it, it was, in fact, superior to it in authority (Matt. ':17-48.) Furthermore, a number of the teachings ascribed to Jesus apparently reflect not his own times and situation, but the times and situation of the early church.

In Mark the emphasis is upon the deeds of Jesus, with minor stress placed upon his teachings. Although he used Mark as a major source, the author of Matthew emphasizes the teachings, drawn from a variety of sources, arranging most of them into five lengthy discourses. Furthermore, it is in these discourses that much of the ecclesiastical interest of the writer is most evident. All this indicates that Matthew, though a gospel in form, is primarily a didactic work, rather than a biography, which may have been designed to be a church manual in function, much like the Didache.

The Didache begins with a section known as the Two Ways, which is introduced by the statement: "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways." A similar teaching concerning the two ways is presented in Matthew 6:13-14, which states that there are two roads leading up to two gates. One of these gates is wide, opening up to an easy way that leads to destruction; the other is narrow, opening up to a hard way that leads to life, that is, to eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven. There are many who take the easy way to destruction, but few who take the hard way to life. Accordingly, the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount as well as in the rest of the Gospel may, perhaps, be considered as a teaching of the two ways, with major emphasis upon the way of life. Although following quite a different order, many of the teachings in Matthew and the Didache are similar if not almost identical. Indeed, many scholars believe that the Didache is, in part derived from Matthew. On the other hand, others (including myself) would say that both have used common sources for their teachings, oral as well as written.

Among these teachings that are to be found in both works, but which have no

direct connection with the church itself, are the two commandments, to love God and to love one's neighbors as oneself, which come first in the Didache, as well as the Golden Rule, found in the negative form in the Didache and combined, quite fittingly, with the two great commandments. Also, the command to bless those who curse you, to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, to give your coat as well as your shirt, and to give to him who asks of you are found in both the Two Ways of the Didache and in chapter 5 of the Sermon on the Mount. However, the injunction to give to all who ask is modified in the Didache to the effect that the giver should be sure that the person who asks is really in need.

There are three teachings in the first part of chapter 6 that may be considered as fitting the two way pattern. One, taking up the matter of charity again, teaches the wrong way and right way of giving alms, the second the wrong and right way of praying, the third the wrong and right way of fasting. Here again there are resemblances to the Didache. Alms are to be given without ostentation, according to Matthew, so that the Father who sees in secret will recompense the giver (6:2-4). Similarly, in the Didache, there is a divine sanction for almsgiving; it is the Father's will that we give to all, (1:5) and God is the Paymaster who will reward the giver (3:7).

Although there are striking differences, both Matthew and the Didache have an injunction not to pray as the hypocrites pray (Matt. 6:5; Did. 8:2). Instead, they are to use a special prayer, the one we know as the Lord's Prayer. The Didache, however, adds the doxology, which was not originally appended to the Matthean form of this prayer, apparently for liturgical usage.

The practice of fasting is dealt with in Matthew 6:16-18 following the commands concerning prayer; in the Didache it is considered in 8:1 preceding the teaching on prayer. In both there is the warning not to fast as the hypocrites do. However, this ends the similarities between the instructions. In all three of these commands concerning alms, prayer, and fasting, Matthew is apparently setting up rules for Christians to follow. The major difference between Matthew and the Didache in these areas is that the latter is more clearly ecclesiastical in its instructions.

The Sermon on the Mount contains a warning against false prophets (7:15-19). This is paralleled by a similar warning in the Didache (11:3-11). It is evident that when the Didache was written there were travelling Christian "apostles and prophets" who exploited the various Christian communities they visited to their own personal advantage, demanding money for themselves. These persons are to be tested to see whether they are true or false prophets. Apparently, a somewhat similar difficulty existed when Matthew was composed. Prophets are to be tested, are to be judged by their conduct, for a good tree produces good fruit, a bad tree bad fruit.

The second discourse is presented in Matt. 10:5-42. The first part, vss. 5-15, contains instructions to the disciples as they are sent out as evangelists or missionaries. It could be that the original instructions have been adapted to the needs of the church when the Gospel was composed. The travelling missionaries are to live quite simply; they are to take no money with them; neither are they to accept any money, but are to be given food and lodging by those among whom they work. They are not to force themselves upon people; when they find a worthy house they are to give it their blessing. The chapter concludes with similar instructions (10:40-42) concerning the treatment of prophets, righteous men, and little ones. Here, according to Johnson, are three categories, the prophets, of course, the tried and tested Christian, and the ordinary Christians. Might not the little ones be new converts, however? The prophet

and the righteous man are to be received, the little ones to be given a cup of cold water (symbolic for some act of charity or good will, perhaps). In any event, he who does these things will be rewarded.

The intervening verses (16-39) seem to have more relevance for the Christian church than for the original disciples, for the instructions seem to reflect the persecution of the Christians by Jewish and Roman authorities rather than the experiences of the original disciples in Jesus' own lifetime. Accordingly, not only is a prediction of persecution attributed to Jesus, but instructions for meeting it are also given. These instructions could very well be an important part of a church manual, even though similar detailed advice is not found in the Didache.

The discourse in chapter 13:1-52 is composed of parables drawn from different sources. It is interesting that the Didache has no parables at all. Whereas the parables as such have no special relationship to the purposes of a church manual, save as they may be reinterpreted, this may not be true of the two accounts of the miraculous feeding of the multitude (14:13-21 and 15:32-39), both of them taken from Mark, which follow.

Whatever their origin may have been, as these stories appear in the gospels they seem to be related to the Lord's Supper, being, perhaps, a variant account of its establishment. While this is no proof of this statement, it might be recalled that in early Christian art the Eucharist is represented by loaves and fish, and in the account in John the feeding of the multitude is closely related to a discourse on the sacrament. This relationship is true, but to a lesser degree, of the Matthean account which copies Mark. For in Matthew 14:19 Jesus' act of looking up to heaven while blessing and breaking the bread seems to prefigure the blessing and breaking the bread of the Lord's Supper, and the statement in Matthew 15:36 that Jesus gave thanks may add to the evidence for this conclusion, for the Greek word for giving thanks is the one from which the word Eucharist is derived.

Later on Matthew, still following Mark rather closely, gives another account of the institution of the Eucharist, the narration of the Last Supper. The Didache does not describe the Last Supper (for it does not relate the deeds of Jesus), but it does give detailed directions for its celebration which differ markedly from the New Testament accounts. It does, however, agree with Luke in having the cup first, the bread second.

The next section to be discussed, Matt. 15:1-20, is also based upon Mark. It deals with the problem of having Christians conform to the strict Jewish regulations concerning ritualistic ablutions and clean and unclean foods. The extent to which Jesus obeyed these codes is uncertain. Would he, for example, have knowingly eaten pork? However, we do know from Paul's letters and from the account of the clean and unclean animals in Acts 10:9ff. that they did constitute a grave problem for converts from the Gentile world as did circumcision. In the teachings now under consideration we seem to have an accommodation, first by Mark and then by Matthew, of certain teachings of Jesus to conditions that arose later on in the Gentile mission, with the validity of the Jewish laws coming into question. Thus, teachings attributed to Jesus superseded those ascribed to Moses. The problem may have been especially acute in a church like Antioch which apparently was composed of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Accordingly, these teachings carrying the authority of Jesus would have been most appropriate in a church manual. Paul, for instance, had to use his own authority for absolving Gentile converts from the law of circumcision, for he apparently knew of no tradition that represented Jesus as having nullified this provision. It may be of interest to recall that ac-

cording to the Gospel of Thomas 53 Jesus taught that circumcision was unprofitable. This may have been an authentic teaching; more likely, however, it represents a later Gentile Christian teaching attributed to Jesus for sanction.

Turning to a very definite ecclesiastical passage, in relating the confession of Peter, Matthew follows Mark very closely, but then adds the well known passage (Matt. 16:17-20) according to which Jesus states: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church," and then gives Peter authority to bind and loose on earth and in heaven. This teaching, rather certainly, represents a church which acknowledged Peter, rather than James, as the head. Curiously enough, according to a teaching in the Gospel of Thomas 12 it is James who is to be the head of the group. Matthem 16:17-20 is paralleled in part by Matthew 18:18-20. But here the authority to bind and loose is given to Christians as they meet together (the church), not to Peter or any other individual.

The verses that immediately precede this last teaching (Matt. 18:15-17) are specifically concerned with church discipline. Our earliest record of a church trial is provided by Paul. Paul relates that one of the members of the church in Corinth had been guilty of gross immorality, and that this man had gained the support of other members. Paul, though absent, condemned him in a rather high-handed way. In addition he wrote that the church itself should hold a meeting and expel him. (I Cor. 5:1-13). In another passage (II Cor. 13:1) he prescribes the Jewish regulations of having two or three witnesses for a trial (II Cor. 13:1). The erring member was tried before Paul arrived in Corinth, found guilty, and expelled. However, later on he repented; accordingly, Paul forgave him, and urged the church to forgive him and restore him to their fellowship (II Cor. 2:5-11). Paul also instructed the Christians not to go to law against each other in the regular courts, but to bring the matter before the church (I Cor. 6:1).

Much the same procedure as that advocated by Paul is outlined in the Matthean passage referred to above. If a church member has been wronged by another, he should attempt to work out a reconciliation with him. If the erring brother refuses to listen, one or two or three witnesses are to counsel with him. If he refuses to heed them, then he is to be brought before the church (**sic**), and if he refuses to listen to the church he is to be treated as a Gentile and a publican, that is, he is to be expelled. It is rather generally conceded that this passage represents the practice of the early church, rather than the actual teachings of Jesus. The whole may have been an outgrowth of what may well have been an authentic teaching of Jesus in Lk. 17:3: ". . . . if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."

Chapter 7 of the Didache discusses baptism. This is to be preceded by instruction (possibly the contents of the Didache itself) and fasting by the candidate and the officiant. Baptism by immersion is preferred, but pouring three times on the head is permitted if there is not enough water available. The triune formula is to be used, baptizing to be "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Matthew is the one Gospel that gives baptismal instructions. This is given in the so-called Great Commission, in words attributed to the risen Jesus. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." ((Matt. 28:19-20a). Three features of this command should be noted. First, it is related to the missionary effort of the church, the Gentile mission as well. Second, the triune formula is to be used as in the Didache, the only place in the New Testament where it is to be found,

whether in connection with baptism or otherwise. Third, instruction is related to baptism, whether before or afterwards is not clear. It could be that the instruction is to be based upon the Gospel itself, that Matthew is, in part, a handbook for the newly baptized.

The author's interest in baptism may be reflected in Matthew 11:25-30. This passage, which contains the very familiar entreaty, "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," may possibly be an early Christian hymn used in connection with baptism, as I suggested some time ago.[3] The entire passage has a distinctive style and strophic arrangement that may well entitle it to be called a hymn. The quasi-Gnostic character of vs. 27 has along been recognized: "All things have been delivered unto me by my Father, and no one knows the Son save the Father; neither does anyone know the Father save the Son, and he to whom he wills to reveal him." These words seem to be alien to anything that Jesus himself would have taught, unless the teachings in John are regarded as authentic. The hymn appeals to the unbaptized, if I am correct, to become babes, that is, to be newly born, to receive the saving Gnosis, to be freed from the burden of sin, and to attain immortality (rest) by accepting baptism in the Christian church, taking the yoke of Jesus upon them, instead of continuing to bear the yoke of sin.

This interpretation of the passage may well be debatable. However, when the Gospel of Matthew is considered as a whole against the background of the Didache, it may be that it was indeed designed, in part at least, to be used as a kind of church manual.

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[3] "Is Matthew 11:25-30 a Primitive Baptismal Hymn?" *Journal of Religion* XV (1935), pp. 63-77.