

((PREACHING *the* WORD))

MATTHEW

ALL AUTHORITY *in*
HEAVEN *and on* EARTH



DOUGLAS SEAN O'DONNELL

R. Kent Hughes

Series Editor

MATTHEW

“Even for the most seasoned of preachers, the thought of expositing the Gospel of Matthew could be overwhelming. Thanks to Doug O’Donnell’s newest commentary, chock-full of impressive insights and engaging wit, the first and perhaps greatest Gospel has suddenly become much less daunting. When Kent Hughes called on O’Donnell to write this volume, he knew exactly what he was doing.”

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“This commentary grows out of wide reading and solid learning—the footnotes alone are a gold mine. O’Donnell writes with a zest for real life, wit, and (controlled) whimsy. The outcome: sermons that both *revel in Christ* and *reveal Christ* in fresh and striking ways. The author proves to be a hard-working and natural expositor of Scripture. This book goes to the top of my list of sterling homiletical commentaries on the first Gospel.”

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Edward W. Klink III, Associate Professor of New Testament, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

Matthew

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A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward

affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes

Preface

The unique feature of this commentary—as opposed to all others in the history of the church—is that I wrote it. I don’t mean that arrogantly or humorously, although I hope you thought the second and are still laughing. I mean it in this sense.

I like Bible commentaries, particularly ones on my favorite book of the Bible (both before and after I was commissioned to do this)—the Gospel of Matthew. Sitting beside me as I write, I have as many commentaries on this Gospel as I have had birthdays. Many of them I have read. Some of them I have used. One of them I enjoyed so much I wish I wrote it. But this commentary is not like them. It’s a pastor’s commentary for pastors, written by a tall pastor from a small church in a large Chicago suburb to other pastors—tall and short, large and small—in America and around the world. It is written to those who will use it as an aid to preach sermons that would make Matthew smile with approval.

And I do mean smile. Matthew didn’t write his Gospel so we’d merely write voluminous tomes that begin “Recent studies on the nature of written documents . . .” or “As in the commentary’s various analytical sections, here in the introduction I will first discuss problems of synchronic analysis before turning to those of diachronic analysis.” He wrote it, as the church has long and rightly assumed, as an evangelist. Irenaeus, Jerome, and those medieval monastic artists got it right: the Gospel of Matthew is the face of man.¹ This Gospel was written by a man for men about the Man. Matthew wants all people everywhere to bow down before that Man, the one to whom all authority in Heaven and on earth has been given. He wants Gentiles and Jews to submit to their King, trusting Jesus to be Savior from sins and Lord of life. He wants us to know Jesus, worship him, obey his teachings, and tell others to do the same.

Thus, my purpose is as close to Matthew’s as possible. Like the Gospel, this commentary was written “to gospel.”² I’m appealing to real people (“let the reader understand,” cf. 24:15) who need a real King. This is not to say I don’t deal with doctrines and difficulties in some depth. Nor is it to say I’m not concerned about getting it right. But it is to say, I am more concerned about practical theology than theoretical. To borrow from J. C. Ryle’s methodology, I have endeavored “to dwell chiefly on the things needful to salvation.”³

I shall say lastly but least importantly, the language of this commentary is reflective of this evangelistic and pastoral purpose. You see, therefore, my

brothers and sisters, I've occasionally used real phrases we use in everyday ecclesial talk—like “my brothers and sisters” and “you see”—to make you see what you're supposed to see. At times I've also included “look there” because I assume you have your Bible open, either as a pastor preparing a sermon or a layperson doing daily devotions. *And* I've even disregarded those old rules of grammar (based on proper Latin, not proper English) about not starting a sentence with a conjunction. I want the language of these now dead sermons to be as alive as Christ. I hope you find that to be the case. Enjoy!

I acknowledge my heartfelt gratitude to Kent Hughes for the privilege of contributing to the *Preaching the Word* series. Kent left a phone message five years ago asking me to contribute a volume and to think about what book of the Bible that might be. The Gospel of Matthew is what first came to mind. However, I was young and didn't want to be so presumptuous as to ask for that. So I called Kent back and left a message that I'd love to contribute and that I'd be happy to take whatever book he assigned. He called back and left another message—asking me to do Matthew!

I am indebted to the careful editing and proofreading of the Crossway staff. Thank you. I'd also like to thank Matt Newkirk, as well as Alexandra Bloom and Emily Gerdtts for their various editorial tasks. Finally, I thank God for my family (Emily, Lily, Evelyn, Simeon, and Charlotte), and notably my oldest son—Sean Michael O'Donnell—to whom I dedicate this book. Sean, I am thankful to God for you more than you can know or imagine.

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1

The Melodic Line of Matthew

AN INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW
OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW



WHEN VAN HALEN'S album *1984* hit the record stores, many a young lad, myself included, signed up for piano lessons. This was because the great guitarist, Eddie Van Halen, learned to play piano and proceeded to compose the hit single of that album—one still played at many NBA tip-offs—"Jump." In six short lessons I learned how to master this melody, which in those days was enough to impress friends, woo girls, and justify the expense of ten-dollar lessons. My performance at the junior high talent show was enough to bestow upon me that prestigious adjective-noun combination—rock star. I entered the stage. The spotlight moved across my face and fingers. Cameras flashed. A sixth grade girl fainted. Wearing black dress pants, a white shirt, one glove, cool sunglasses, and (yes!) a skinny piano tie, I sat on my poorly padded bench and bum before my Korg 500 digital synthesizer and played perfectly the rudimentary bass line and monotonous melody of Van Halen's masterpiece.

I'm not certain if such an introduction to a Gospel is sacrilegious or just silly. I intended neither. I actually intended to get your attention in order to make a basic point about music and to show how such a point can and does relate to our study of any piece of literature, notably Matthew's Gospel. The point is this: just as every good song has a melodic line (a tune that brings unity to the whole by its recurrence)—think of the chorus of "Jump" or "Ode to Joy" of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Fourth Movement—so too does every book of the Bible.

I'll put it this way. The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—all sound the same. That is, they all have a similar bass line. It's as simple as the two C notes I learned for that Van Halen song. They focus on the same person (Jesus), and they were written for the same primary purpose (conversion to Christ; see John 20:31). In all four we hear those same deep, steady notes of Jesus as the Son, Savior, and Christ. We behold him as a miracle-worker. We hear his teaching and his call to faith and repentance. We encounter his passion, death, and resurrection. In these ways, all four sound the same. They have the same bass line. Yet each Gospel has a distinct melody of its own. And just as we can recognize the melody of "Ode to Joy" each time we hear the first four notes or "Jump" when we hear the first four chords, so can we recognize Matthew's melody if we hear the recurring themes.

In Beethoven's Fourth Movement of the Ninth Symphony, the beginning and the end are important. Matthew's Gospel is the same. We hear the melody most clearly at the top and tail. Look at the first words with which Matthew begins: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David" (1:1). Notice the first two titles applied to Jesus. The first is "Christ." That is not a last name. That is a title. It means "anointed one" or "king." This is a book about King Jesus. That point is reiterated with the next title, "the son of David." David was the great king of Israel, the one to whom a great promise was made. In 2 Samuel 7 we are told that through his offspring God would establish a forever kingdom. So with those first two titles you can hear the first note of the melodic line: Jesus, the King. Jesus is a sovereign who will be sovereign over an everlasting kingdom!

From that note of kingly authority Matthew subtly drops a half-step to the next note. He does this by moving from Jesus being "the son of David" to also being "the son of Abraham."

Who was Abraham and why does he matter? Abraham was the non-Israelite Father of Israel. That is the point Paul will make in Romans 4, that Abraham *of Ur* wasn't a "Hebrew" (Genesis 14:13) until he became one (you'll have to think about that to get it). And why is he important? Abraham is important because he too received a great promise from God. In Genesis 12:1–3 God explained how through him and his offspring all "nations" would be blessed (cf. 17:4; 18:18; 22:18).

So, the point of these two persons and promises is this: Jesus will be that Davidic King who will reign over that eternal kingdom that will be a blessing to all peoples of the earth.

Jesus is King. That's the first note. Jesus is the King of Jews and Gentiles. That's the second. The third is a necessary admonition: Therefore, this King Jesus is to be worshipped. Read 2:1–11. This is perhaps the best summary picture of Matthew's Gospel. Here we find very non-Jewish people—"wise men from the east" (2:1). What have they come to do? They have come to finish the melodic line. They have come to worship the newborn king—to give their allegiance to him.

That's how this Gospel begins. That's the top.

Next let's turn to the tail. Like a fine symphony, Matthew's melodic line resurfaces time and again through each chapter, oftentimes like a cello quietly playing in the background, until finally we come to the finale, where the whole orchestra, chorus, and even the audience stand up, play, and sing in one voice! This happens in the last three verses—the Great Commission. Listen for yourself. Listen for the culmination of all the subtle and strong sounds.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (28:18–20)

Underline all the *all* phrases: "all authority," "all nations," "observe all" (cf. "always" in v. 20). Those are the same three notes found in 1:1—2:11 and found, as we will see throughout our study, everywhere in this Gospel. If it helps, you can think of it like this. Here's my prosaic summary: *Jesus has all authority so that all nations might obey all he has commanded*, or more simply and poetically, like this:

All authority

All nations

All allegiance

I don't like to say any one passage in the Bible is more important than another, for they are all divinely inspired, but I will say that if you understand the Great Commission in its context, you will very well understand the Gospel of Matthew.

This chapter will not be an exposition on the Great Commission per se. I will do that later in chapter 89. This is only a preparation for it. That is, at the start of our exploration of Matthew, I want to show you these three notes—this melodic line—so you might better hear them when we come to them.

All Authority

So listen to the first note of this Gospel—*all authority*. After his sacrificial death and glorious resurrection, Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (28:18).

That is not a statement you hear every day, is it? Yet, it is so familiar to us that we don’t recognize how bizarre it is. Think of the most famous and powerful man alive today. Let’s say, for the sake of argument, it’s Barack Obama (the President of the United States at the time of this writing). If he said what Jesus said, what would you say of him? If he called a press conference and said, “I have all authority in Chicago,” what would you think of him? How about if he said, “I have all authority in America”? What if he said, “I have all authority over the world”? If he said any of those, you’d think he was (to borrow from C. S. Lewis) either a liar or a lunatic, or more precisely an unrealistic egoist or an overly ambitious idiot.

Nobody talks the way Jesus talked. Those today who have great authority, even if they overestimate their power and over-estimate themselves, do not talk like Jesus talked. They do not claim to be the king of Heaven and earth. They do not claim, as they sit on their glorious throne no less(!), that every person from every time and everywhere will one day come before them to be judged. They do not claim to have authority to forgive sins. They do not claim to be greater than the temple and the Torah or to be the fulfillment and embodiment of the Hebrew Scriptures. They do not claim that their rule will spread to every corner of the world. They do not claim to establish an unconquerable church and institute new sacraments that have themselves as the foundation and focus. They do not claim that all their commandments are to be obeyed.

Yet with that said, as striking as such statements are, the more striking fact about Jesus is not only that he made such claims, but that somehow such claims are believable. Jesus is believable! Right? You believe him. I believe him. Maybe we’re just extremely gullible. Maybe we were all just brain-washed as children. That might explain some of us, but it doesn’t explain all of us. It doesn’t explain how for so many centuries very sensible, non-superstitious people have taken Jesus at his word. There is something very believable about Jesus, about the testimony of him that a fisherman,¹ doctor, and tax collector put together.

And as I come to this tax collector’s testimony, I compare it to the preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, which can be called “logic on fire.”² Matthew has a certain logic about him. He gives us various reasonable proofs for Jesus’

crazy claims. But such proofs are not like a mathematical equation. Rather, they are like the burning bush that Moses encountered, a bush that burns but never burns out. You have to come close enough to feel its heat to know it's true. Logic on fire!

Think of it like this. I won't go too far from the burning bush analogy. I'll just update and extend the metaphor. Think of Matthew's case for Christ and his absolute authority like one of those metal fire pits. In the fire pit itself are these burning but not burning-out claims of Christ—"I have authority over all things," etc. Then there are those four sturdy, cast-iron legs that hold the pit up and in place. Each leg by itself would not necessarily hold up the claims, but together they make a pretty solid base.

Let's briefly examine the legs that hold up his claims.

The first leg is *fulfillment*. Matthew will repeatedly use the word "fulfilled" and phrases like "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet" to show that what was promised in the Old Testament is now being fulfilled in Jesus. He highlights general characteristics of what to expect in the Messiah as well as specific prophecies—e.g., "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (1:23) or "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey" (21:5). Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will say of himself, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (5:17). The idea is this: check what the Old Testament says. Check what Jesus does and says. Then you might very well say, "By golly, the shoe fits!"

The second leg is *teaching*. If you have one of those Bibles that has all the words of Jesus in red, in Matthew you will see a lot of red. But the point is not simply that Jesus taught a lot. It is that he taught with authority. That is what the crowds noticed. He taught them "as one who had authority" (7:29). This will be the constant criticism of his critics, who will ask, "By what authority" he does this or says that (cf. 21:23–27).

Jesus taught with authority, but an authority unlike any other. It's nice to say, as so many today do, "I like Jesus—the good moral teacher." But that is to listen to only half the story. That is to read only half the red. Jesus once said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (24:35). That is a remarkable statement. How can he say that and get away with it? I think he can do so because so far he has been right! It has been nearly 2,000 years since he first said those words, and we are still talking about them today. I am quoting from Jesus' teachings to people who still read commentaries on Jesus' teachings and who have, in fact, experienced the life-changing power of his words.

The third leg is *character*. A wise person can say some wise things, and some of those wise things can be remembered, even many years later. We still quote Socrates. But nobody worships Socrates. Why? Well, because he never claimed to be God, and because his character never had to fit his claims. As John Stott says, “There is no dichotomy between [Jesus’] character and his claims.”³

I am a student of church history. And there is a certain sadness to such study, for whenever I study popular figures in Christian history, I am always left with a bittersweet taste. I admire them. But I also don’t aspire to be like them (at least not precisely). I recognize their flaws. However, I’ve been looking and listening to Jesus and reading about him for two decades now, and I haven’t yet found the flaw. Even what seems like a flaw—like his anger over the fruitless fig tree or his overturning the tables—when I understand what he was doing, all makes marvelous sense. I like Jesus more. I love Jesus more. I want to be like Jesus more. Jesus’ character is so compelling. It supports his claims. And it is his humility, ironically, that I and many other Christians have found to be Christ’s most compelling characteristic. John Stott puts it this way,

[Jesus’] claims for himself are very disturbing because they are so self-centered; yet in his behavior he was clothed with humility. His claims sound proud, but he was humble. I see this paradox at its sharpest when he was with his disciples in the upper room before he died. He said he was their Lord, their teacher and their judge, but he took a towel, got on his hands and knees, and washed their feet like a common slave. Is this not unique in the history of the world? There have been lots of arrogant people, but they have all behaved like it. There have also been humble people, but they have not made great claims for themselves. It is the combination of egocentricity and humility that is so startling—the egocentricity of his teaching and the humility of his behavior.⁴

The fourth leg is his *miracles*. By themselves, the miracles are not what is unique about him. But as the last and final leg, his miracles hold everything in place perfectly. The healing of the blind men, the lepers, the multiplication of the fishes and loaves, and the resurrection itself all point beyond themselves to Jesus’ identity. They point to his authority—his authority to forgive sins, his authority over disease, and his authority to conquer even death, of which there is nothing so powerful and prevalent in this world. If you can conquer death, you have a lot of power!

All authority is the first and key note in Matthew’s Gospel. Tragically it is the most disregarded thought in the world today. Non-Christians don’t mind if we sing to them of Jesus’ compassion or humility—just don’t sing of his

exclusive authority. Do you hear how people talk today? They staunchly and arrogantly hold their doctrine—“doctrines do not matter”—and with a tinge of moral superiority and intellectual enlightenment (as if able to look over all the cosmos and overlook all religions), they say to us dogmatically, “All belief systems are morally equal and should thus coexist.”

We are to *coexist*. Perhaps you have heard that spiritual slogan or seen it written across a bumper sticker. I actually saw it carved into a pumpkin sitting outside a church one Halloween. Do you know what I’m talking about? It is the word “coexist” with each letter a symbol of one of seven world religions or philosophies. It’s a popular slogan because it’s a popular sentiment.



Now I assure you, I don’t have a problem with coexisting. I don’t have a problem with tolerance if tolerance means what it should mean. I will tolerate you; that is, I won’t persecute you for your beliefs. I will coexist with you. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism can and do coexist in most places. But I will not put my brain under a bushel basket. Since I am convicted by Matthew’s logic on fire that Jesus has all authority in Heaven and on earth I’m not going to say, “Your god is as true or as real as my God.” Jesus either has all authority or he does not. And if he does not, then let’s move on. Let’s close up shop. Let’s stop calling ourselves Christians. But if he does have all authority, then we can certainly coexist with our fellow human beings who believe differently than we do, as long as we know that we won’t coexist forever, for as Jesus said in Matthew 25:31–34, 41 (quite strikingly and offensively):

When the Son of Man comes in his glory . . . then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. . . . Then the king [King Jesus] will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. . . .” Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

All authority is the first note of Matthew’s melodic line.⁵ And I know, as you know, that note doesn’t resonate with our culture. Which either means the

note is off or our ears are bad. Jesus will tell everyone who rejects his claim that it is the latter.

All Nations

Whatever we might think of the first note, thankfully the second note does appeal to our American ears. It is right, and it sounds right. That note is *all nations*. In the Great Commission, Jesus commissions his followers to take the gospel to the world, to “every tribe and language and people and nation,” as the book of Revelation repeatedly describes (5:9; cf. 13:7; 14:6).

This might not sound like a radical concept because we know Christianity is the largest religion in the world and the fastest growing and that it has spread to nearly every nook and cranny of this “terrestrial ball,” to borrow from that very applicable hymn, “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name.” Yet I want you to know that this idea—to “go and make disciples of all nations” not by the sword but by the Word—is a concept as revolutionary as Copernicus’s claim that the earth revolves around the sun.

Some people think Christianity is a Western religion, and thus assert that it is culturally rigid. That belief (to put it in a very sophisticated way) is the biggest bunch of bunk! Jesus said his kingdom would start as small as a mustard seed and grow slowly but surely into a big and beautiful tree, grafting people from east and west, north and south, from Jerusalem, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (8:11; 13:31, 47; cf. Acts 1:8). Has he been right about that? Oh yes! As Tim Keller notes,

The pattern of Christian expansion differs from that of every other world religion. The center and majority of Islam’s population is still in the place of its origin—the Middle East. The original lands that have been the demographic centers of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism have remained so. By contrast, Christianity was first dominated by Jews and centered in Jerusalem. Later it was dominated by Hellenists and centered in the Mediterranean. Later the faith was received by the barbarians of Northern Europe and Christianity came to be dominated by western Europeans and then North Americans. Today most Christians in the world live in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Christianity soon will be centered in the southern and eastern hemispheres.⁶

Let me ask you a trivia question: What country has or soon will have the most Christians? Missiologists estimate that China—a Communist, officially anti-Christian country—has the most Christians in the world. So, when you think of the future face of Christianity think not of an American girl but a Chinese boy.

Jesus is the King of the Jews. Matthew will make this point directly and indirectly. But he will also show us that this King of the Jews is also King of the Gentiles—“He will proclaim justice to the Gentiles . . . and in his name the Gentiles will hope” (12:18, 21; cf. Romans 15:9–12).

Above the cross was written, sarcastically, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews” (27:37). It was written in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin—the languages of that world (see John 19:20). But today it reads, realistically, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews and the Gentiles.” And it is written in Aramaic, Greek, Latin, Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish, English, Arabic, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, Japanese, German, and nearly every other language imaginable.

In the Synoptic Gospels, when Jesus dies, something significant and symbolic happens. The curtain of the temple is torn in two. This shows God’s power and his approval of the cross. But it also symbolizes that the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles has been forever torn down. Now whoever believes in Immanuel can have access to God. In Matthew’s Gospel, as the curtain is tearing, the ground at the foot of the cross is shaking, and the centurion upon that ground as well. Filled with fear and faith, this Gentile Roman soldier announces, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (27:54).

John the Baptist said, “God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (3:9). In Matthew’s Gospel that is exactly what we see—stones being turned into children of God—a Canaanite woman, a ceremonially unclean Jewish woman, lepers, tax collectors, and even two Roman soldiers.

If you love paradox and irony, you will love this Gospel, for the rulers of the earth—Herod and Pilate—will reject Jesus. The most devoutly religious—the scribes, the Pharisees, and temple authorities—will reject Jesus. But the rejects will not reject him. Those from the wrong race or class or sex find Jesus just alright. The kids picked last for the team are picked up by Jesus. Jesus loves the losers. And the losers love him.

In the first chapter of Romans, after Paul summarizes “the gospel of God” in verses 1–5 as being good news about Jesus for the nations, he makes that memorable statement in 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek [i.e., Gentile].” So yes, the gospel is exclusive—it is exclusively about Jesus and his kingdom. But it is also inclusive—it includes all who will believe.

My brothers and sisters, we must not be ashamed of this exclusive/inclusive gospel. The inclusivity of Christianity is today one of our greatest appeals. The social progressives didn’t get to this first. Jesus got to it. No, Jesus created it! That’s what so astonishing. It is not astonishing that Oprah

or Desmond Tutu would say, “We should embrace people of different ethnicities.” But for a Jewish man, twenty centuries ago, to say it and live it out in a culture where the opposite was absolutely normative . . . I can’t think of anything more astonishing. It had the earliest Jewish converts to Christianity scratching their heads. But we should not be scratching ours.

All Allegiance

All authority—that’s the first note; all nations, the second; now finally, *all allegiance*, the third.

As many have noticed, Matthew’s Gospel is a gospel of discipleship. It speaks of the call, cost, and content of discipleship. Time and time again Jesus will say, “Follow me.” Each time an individual will be met with the same choice we have before us today: Jesus above money? Jesus above power? Jesus above reputation? Jesus above comfort? Jesus above tradition? Jesus above family? Jesus above life and breath? Those are the choices put before both great governors and lowly lepers. Jesus will say:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me . . . whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (10:37–39)

Matthew’s Gospel has this beautiful balance between forgiveness, faith, and obedience. At the center of the Sermon on the Mount is the petition “forgive us our debts” (6:12), and at the end of the Lord’s Supper is the pronouncement, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28). And it is this blood that is poured out for the forgiveness of sins that flows into us through faith, giving our dry bones new flesh—new ears and eyes and hearts and hands, giving us all that we need for life and godliness.

Following Jesus means absolute allegiance—trust in him and obedience to him. In the Great Commission Jesus will put it this way: we are “to observe all” that he has “commanded” (28:20). Do I mean his teachings on sin and Scripture, idolatry and adultery, money and marriage, slander and suffering, anger and evangelism, purity and prayer, alms and anxiety, fasting and forgiveness, luxury and love? Yes! Everything he commanded.

Christianity is not a pick-n-save religion: you pick whatever teachings you like and you still get saved. Oh no! If that’s how you think, you have it all wrong. Just listen to Jesus if you won’t listen to me. He stated it straight-

forwardly: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but *the one who does the will of my Father* who is in heaven” (7:21). To be a follower of Jesus is to be someone who does “the will of [his] Father in heaven” (cf. 12:50)—not perfectly as Jesus did, but consistently and repentantly. It’s a matter of allegiance: Jesus first, everyone and everything else second.

You see, all authority demands all allegiance from everybody . . . even me and even you.

Welcome to the Gospel of Matthew!

2

Perfect Aim

MATTHEW 1:1–17



RECENTLY I LISTENED to a fascinating talk by Marvin Rosenthal, a Jewish convert to Christianity. He shared how Matthew’s genealogy was one of the proofs that persuaded him that Jesus is the Messiah. To explain what he meant Rosenthal used a helpful analogy from his experience as a U.S. Marine many decades ago. At the rifle range, he and his fellow soldiers would practice their aim by shooting at a target from three distances—200, 300, and 500 yards. From that distance they couldn’t always tell by the naked eye if their bullets hit the target or not. So, in order to determine their accuracy, one of the soldiers would hide down in a nine-foot ravine behind the target until he heard ten shots. Then he would get up and check the sharpness of the shooter. He would add up the score and relay the results by slipping a colored disk onto the end of a pole and raising it up high. The color of the disk would communicate the shooter’s accuracy. If you missed the target completely, a big flag would be waved, a military way of saying, “You ought to be embarrassed!” Yet, for each bull’s-eye a red disk would be secured to the pole and the pole would go up and down. So if you were six out of ten, the pole would go up and down six times. Now, if you hit the bull’s-eye ten times out of ten, that same pole and red disk would simply be spun around once. Rosenthal goes on to say that, especially for a Jewish audience (who understands the significance and the necessity of genealogical records), Matthew’s genealogy hits the bull’s-eye ten times out of ten.¹

As we explore this genealogy, I’m going to utilize Rosenthal’s analogy with some slight modifications. I want you to think of this text like a target set before us. Let’s make it three targets. And I want you to think of God, not with a rifle in his hand (I’ll tame the imagery just a bit, in fact, I’ll make

it more Biblical) but as an archer with a bow and three arrows (e.g., Psalm 64:7). Now watch what he'll do. With this genealogy he will take three shots at three targets, each time hitting them dead center. God can see that he has hit the bull's-eyes, but he wants us to see it as well. He wants us, if you will, to insert the red disk, raise up the pole, and turn it once, showing we know and appreciate his perfect aim.

Right Line—Jesus Is from the Line of Abraham and David

We will call the first target “God hits *the right line*.” (Let’s say this one is 200 yards away.) Jesus is from the right bloodline, as Matthew will say from the start. Jesus is “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (v. 1). Abraham and David are two key names in this genealogy. If you miss seeing them (at the top and tail, in v. 1 and v. 17, and also in v. 2 and v. 6), you miss everything.

Now, what’s so important about these two men? Two promises! God gave each a specific promise. In Genesis 12:1–3 God says to Abraham:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Through Abraham and his offspring God will raise up a people (Israel) who will be a blessing to the entire world (the Gentiles). This is the beginning of the Abrahamic Covenant. Paul also called it, in a broad sense, “the gospel” (Galatians 3:8). This “gospel” is further specified by the Davidic Covenant, the promise made in 2 Samuel 7:12, 13 (cf. 1 Chronicles 17), where David is promised that one of his descendants would establish a forever kingdom:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew brings these promises together in the person of Christ, with what Jesus calls “the gospel of the kingdom” (4:23; 9:35; 24:14—this phrase is only used in Matthew). However, this is not the point of the genealogy. Here, the Evangelist is simply showing how God hits the lineage target—i.e., how Jesus is a descendant of both Abraham and David. Jesus comes from the right line. As Craig Blomberg summarizes, he has “the correct scriptural pedigree to be the Messiah.”² The Messiah must

be a Jew (a son of Abraham, v. 2), but he also must be from the tribe of Judah (vv. 2, 3; cf. Genesis 49:8–10), and from one specific member of that tribe (David, v. 6). Jesus has all of this going for him.

But Jesus wasn't the only person in world history to have such a lineage. All those listed in verses 6–16 shared his lineage, as well as others who were his contemporaries, like his four brothers (13:55) or the famous rabbi Hillel. So in some ways it's like the time my mother did our family genealogy in which she traced the O'Donnells back to a line of Irish kings. I come from nobility, which is no surprise to me. But it was a surprise when I learned that all of Ireland was once run by various nobles, thus indicating that anyone with Irish ancestry was descended from some Irish "king." Well, you'll be glad to know that Jewish genealogies aren't the same as Irish ones. Only a select group of men in the history of the world came from Abraham and David. The select group, however, was larger than one man. Jesus wasn't the only Jew who could claim lineage from this patriarch and that king. And that's why two more targets are set in place.

Yet, before we move on to them, I want us here and now to stop and think about the obvious, which we so often fail to do. In Matthew 1:18–25, which we will look at in the next chapter, an angel appears to Joseph and tells him what is happening with Mary, his betrothed. He is told about this son who is to come, whom he is to name, "Jesus," which means "Yahweh saves." After he is told the details of the divine plan, we read in verses 22, 23:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet [Isaiah]: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

Jesus is Immanuel. The man Jesus is "God with us." Now, while "Immanuel" can refer *merely* to God's presence through Jesus, as John Nolland argues,³ I believe an additional complementary truth can be embraced, which in no way diminishes Matthew's emphasis. That truth is that the one who brings to humankind the divine presence (Jesus) is also fully divine. Matthew stresses equally that Jesus is the presence of God in the world (cf. 18:20; 28:20),⁴ while being the fleshly embodiment of the deity. Thus I say that what Paul said in Colossians 2:9 is a fitting summary of Matthew 1:23: "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily."

That's so easy to forget, isn't it? I forgot the awesomeness of it until I opened Charles Spurgeon's commentary on Matthew and saw how he pauses in his second paragraph on the genealogy. He ceases making observations and

for a time simply engages in pure adoration. “Marvelous condescension,” he writes, “that [God] should be a man, and have a genealogy, even He who ‘was in the beginning with God,’ and ‘thought it not robbery to be equal to God’!”⁵ Marvelous condescension!

We think it is such a wonderful thing when a queen from another country comes to visit and offers her greetings and love. We think it is such a wonderful thing when a rich businessman volunteers for a night to help at a homeless shelter, providing food and comfort to the poor. We think it is such a wonderful thing when a professional athlete gives of her time to conduct a free clinic for inner-city kids. Such are wonderful things, all of which we recognize, appreciate, and applaud—the humility and condescension. But what marvelous, unfathomable humility and condescension it was when God became man. When you read 1:1, “the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ” alongside 1:23, “and they shall call his name Immanuel,” it ought to be enough for us to stop and think, to pause and praise, and to join in the angelic chorus, singing,

Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see,
Hail th’ incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus our Emmanuel.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King.”⁶

Right Time—Jesus Came at the Right Time

Jesus is from the right line. That’s important and necessary. Without it we stop the target practice. We look for a Messiah elsewhere.

In addition, Jesus was born at the *right time*. That’s the second target we’ll take a look at, and we’ll see that God’s arrow here likewise goes straight into the middle. Look at verse 17. Matthew wants to make sure we see this. So he ends the genealogy like this:

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

Matthew is saying that there are three key periods thus far in salvation history. Frederick Dale Bruner helpfully suggests that we think of the history here like the capital letter N. The first fourteen generations head upward from Abraham to David, the second fourteen downward from Solomon to the Babylonian exile, and then the final fourteen “move upward again in hope and fulfillment from the exile to Christ.”⁷

Scholars disagree as to why Matthew structures the genealogy this way. Some say the number fourteen is a literary device called a *gematria*. In Hebrew each letter has numerical value. *Aleph*, the first letter, is worth one; *dalet*, the fourth letter, is worth four; *vav*, the sixth letter, is worth six, etc. The word “David” in Hebrew is comprised of three letters (*dalet/vav/dalet*—four/six/four) which equal fourteen. So perhaps Matthew is telling us prosaically as well as poetically, “Jesus is the son of David” (underline David).

Others theorize that the three fourteens are just a structural way of aiding our weak memories.⁸ The argument is that Matthew limits all the names he could have had so we would remember the genealogy itself and the necessary and important names within it.

Beyond the numerical or mnemonic value, Matthew’s structure has theological value. He has intentionally selected names (real historical people who are really part of Joseph and Mary’s line) and arranged them to make the same theological point that Paul made in Galatians 4:4a: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son” (cf. Hebrews 9:26). In other words, God has designed history around the birth of Jesus.

On paper we agree. Christmas is the center of history. But so often this head knowledge has yet to make it to our hearts. We might write BC (“Before Christ”) or AD (“*Anno Domini*,” “in the year of our Lord”), but we are often far removed theologically and emotionally from the importance of this reality.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus didn’t come to earth as a man in the modern age rather than in the first century? Why didn’t he come to earth during the era of television, video, and the Internet, when nearly all that he said and did could be precisely documented? Can’t you just picture CNN reporters and paparazzi camped a few feet away from Jesus and the Twelve for three years straight? Can’t you imagine a streaming video of his each and every movement? Can’t you imagine the ten o’clock news starting every night with something from the life of Christ—“Today Jesus healed ten lepers. We interviewed nine of them. One refused an interview in order to return to Jesus for a word of thanks.” And can’t you imagine years from now, when some rebellious teen started to doubt the claims of Christ, how the teachers of the times would just pull out their computerized contraptions and say, “Now, son, look here, it’s all on video.” And then this teacher would proceed to show the clip, the most famous one played on YouTube—Jesus’ resurrection. Everyone has seen it. The reporter is outside the tomb, giving a play-by-play of Jesus’ life, and while he’s saying something about Christ’s claim to rise again, lo and behold, the stone is rolled away. There it is on film! They take a close-up and out comes the Son of God, just as he said he would. Who wouldn’t believe?

Sometimes we wish God's timing were different. And sometimes we wish God took out the "faith" part of our faith. What I mean is, some of us think like Carl Sagan thought. Sagan, the brilliant scientist but foolish man, once said he'd believe there was a God if God had written the Ten Commandments on the moon. Well sure, everyone would believe if that were the case. But that would take the faith out of faith, which would as be as bad as taking the mystery out of romance, the curiosity out of the cat, or the oxygen out of the air.

When Scripture says that Jesus came at "the fullness of time," it means it. God designed history—with the rise of this empire and the fall of that one, with this person born here and that person born there, with this event happening now and that one then—to prepare us for Jesus and to give room for faith. God values us too much to treat us like robots, and I'll add (and maybe I'm bold to do so) that only unimaginative atheists want the Ten Commandments painted on the moon or Jesus captured on videotape.

The Bible tells us that while God's ways are hidden to some extent (e.g., Deuteronomy 29:29; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:3–6), nevertheless "his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature," as Romans 1:20 puts it, are as obvious as the North Star on a clear night. When we die, we will find this reality to be as real as oxygen, which we cannot see or taste or touch, but we know it's there, keeping us alive every second of the day.

God is real, and he is faithful, and we can see such attributes in creation and in Scripture. Yet God has not made himself so self-evident that no faith whatsoever is required. How boring that would be. How dull. How lifeless. How robotic. How so *not* like he who created this unbelievably complex, mysterious, beautiful universe. How so *not* like he who glories in bestowing the gift of faith to undeserving and rebellious sinners (see Matthew 16:17).

There is enough evidence for my children—whether it's facial features, lanky limbs, or personality characteristics—to recognize me as their father. But if each one of them demanded a DNA test before they would acknowledge and appreciate me as such, then they would be very ungrateful and overly demanding children. God has given us *creation*—what Calvin called the theatre of his glory—and *Scripture*, what I'll call the evidence of his faithfulness, and yet how many humans want a DNA test before they will call him, "Abba, Father." Thankless little brats, aren't they?

Let's not be thankless little brats. Let's look at the arrow in the middle of this target. Let's have faith, more than we had when we read the last page. Let's recognize that Jesus came at the right time, which is one of the many

marks that he's the right one. He is the Messiah with whom we can trust our very lives.

Right Design—Jesus Came Even for Gentile Sinners

So here we are, sitting and waiting in the nine-foot ravine. We've come up once to see God hit that first target right in the middle—Jesus, the Son of David and Abraham. We are in awe of the incarnation. Then we've come up again to see God hit that second target dead-on—Jesus came at the right time (fourteen/fourteen/fourteen). Our faith in his faithfulness and in his sovereign rule of this world and its history is elevated. Finally we hear the third arrow strike. We jump up and see that, sure enough, God is three for three.

The first target is the right line, the second is the right time, and the third is (oh yes, I've made it rhyme with line and time) *the right design*. It is not simply that Jesus came as a Jew from a lineage of kings and at the perfect time in history, but it is also the design of it all—why he came and for whom he came. That's what we'll explore last but not least. In fact, this last point likely is the *least* least. This is the 500-yard shot that strikes with such accuracy and force that it goes through the bull's-eye and out the back of the target! It's the shot we are to see, stand up, and applaud!

So, what's the design? It is a strange design, but it's a Scriptural one.

Matthew's genealogy is unparalleled. While it appeals to a Jewish audience because it is a genealogy, it has at least three peculiarities that would have offended a pharisaical Jew who, for example, valued racial, moral, and patriarchal purity.

The first peculiarity is that Matthew includes five women: Tamar (v. 3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), the wife of Uriah, whom we know to be Bathsheba (v. 6), and Mary (v. 16), the mother of our Lord. This mention of women here is as strange as having “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary” as the first two official eyewitnesses of the resurrection, which Matthew records in 28:1–10. This is peculiar because a woman's testimony was not valid in a court of law, and a woman's name in a Jewish genealogy was of little legal significance. (Note the word “father,” repeated thirty-nine times!) This is why in other Biblical genealogies, such as the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles, very few women are mentioned, and the ones who are named are likely added to show “the purity of the line or enhance its dignity.”⁹ But here in Matthew, the great Hebrew matriarchs are missing.¹⁰ Where is Sarah, Rebekah, or Leah?

Matthew records five women in this genealogy. This is peculiar. But it's a peculiarity with a purpose. It's part of the plan. It's in the divine design. With the coming of Jesus, women do not gain new status within God's covenant

people. However, they do take on key roles in the drama of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Matthew sees fit to note this at the beginning and end of his Gospel.

Now, if it's not bad enough that there are so many women in this genealogy, it is even worse (to continue my sarcasm) that four out of five are not even Jewish. Besides Mary, who was likely herself from the kingly line of David,¹¹ Jesus' genealogy is full of a bunch of *Gentile* women! Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites (a race of people with which the Israelites were forbidden to intermarry). Ruth was a Moabite. The Moabites trace their lineage back to incestuous Lot. Remember the story of Genesis 19? It's a true but terrible story. Moreover, we're told in Deuteronomy 23:3–5 that the Moabites were excluded from Israel's assembly because they refused to give them food and drink after they left Egypt. So, for Naomi's son to marry Ruth in the first place would have been as scandalous as a Swedish-American in the 1920s marrying an African-American. "You want to marry a Moabite?" We can almost hear Naomi cringe. Then we have Bathsheba. She was the wife of Uriah before she was the wife of David. Uriah, we are told in 2 Samuel 11:3, was a Hittite. He was a Gentile. While Bathsheba was likely an Israelite, as she was the daughter of Eliam, the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite (2 Samuel 11:3; 23:34),¹² through marriage she legally become a Hittite.

So am I saying that King David's great-grandmother was a Moabite and his wife, the mother of great King Solomon, a Hittite of sorts? I'm afraid so. The bloodline is impure. It's as bad as Prince Charles marrying that woman of non-royal stock. Ah, but again, it's all part of the plan, a plan that Paul explains most plainly in Galatians 3:27–29: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither *Jew nor Greek*, there is neither slave nor free, there is *no male and female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." Even Canaanites, as we shall see in 15:21–28, can come into the kingdom; even Gentile dogs can eat the crumbs that fall from the King's table.

The first peculiarity of this genealogy is the mention of five women. The second is that at least three are Gentiles. The third is that most of them were involved in (how shall I put this?) irregular sexual liaisons. Tamar dressed as a prostitute in order to get her father-in-law, Judah, to give her lawful offspring. This plan worked, for that's how Perez and Zerah (the twins mentioned in v. 3) came into this world. Forget the soap opera tomorrow morning or *Desperate Housewives* reruns. Just give good old Genesis 38 a read. That's Tamar. Then we have Rahab, who didn't disguise herself as a prostitute but

actually was a prostitute in Jericho, that wicked town where the walls came tumbling down. She became—as the books of Joshua (2), Hebrews (11) and James (2) point out—a woman of faith. However, the scandal of her past is what it is. Finally, we have Bathsheba, who was certainly taken advantage of by King David. But she was, in my estimation, not perfectly innocent. She was after all taking an indiscreet bath out in the open, in the king’s view, and she didn’t say no to his advances when the Law said that a woman should in such a situation. Either way, even if she was only 2 percent to blame, she was involved in an adulterous affair, one that cost the life of her first husband and her first son and one that certainly marred her reputation.

Yet even the sexual irregularities of these women are part of the design. For they prepare us for the most irregular sexual or *non-sexual* encounter of all time. They prepare us for the virgin conception and birth.¹³ For those who doubt that God would work through an unmarried, teenage girl to bring about the Messiah, Matthew is saying, “Well, take a look at Grandma Tamar and Bathsheba. Look at the line. Notice the design!” If David and Solomon could come from where they came from, then the King of kings could come, as Isaiah said he would, from *a virgin*, this pure girl of marred reputation named Mary.

Now as I said, that’s one of the things that Matthew is up to. The other is this: Jesus comes from the right stock, but it is bad stock. As one commentator says, there is “no pattern of righteousness in the lineage of Jesus.”¹⁴ Jesus comes from a bunch of sinners. I don’t just mean Tamar and Rahab. Look at the list of wicked kings here—e.g., Rehoboam, Abijah, and Ahaz. Ahaz!

Moreover, look at the so-called “righteous” men of old—like Abraham (who lied) or Judah (whose idea it was to sell his brother Joseph into slavery and who was, after his own admission, worse than Tamar) or David (with his adultery and murder, two permanent marks on his background check) or Solomon (with his polygamy and idolatry) or even good Hezekiah (with his pride in being good). And you thought your family tree is a mess. It’s as if Matthew puts a criminal lineup before us.

But why? What’s the moral of this method? Why inform us that “Jesus did not belong to the nice clean world of middle-class respectability, but rather he ‘belonged to a family of murderers, cheats, cowards, adulterers and liars’”?¹⁵ The point is “almost too obvious to belabor.”¹⁶ Matthew wants to show us what Paul will teach us in 1 Timothy 1:15: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Jesus came not for the righteous but the unrighteous (cf. 9:13), for sinners—like Matthew the tax collector and Rahab the prostitute. He came for sinners like you and like me.

Conclusion: The Genesis of Jesus

In the Greek the word “genealogy” can be rendered “genesis”—“The book of the ‘Genesis’ of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ This is important to note, for with Jesus we have a “New Genesis,”¹⁸ a new beginning, one far greater than the first. For whereas God in the first Genesis fashioned the deepest oceans and the highest heavens, now in his Son he has poured into those places grace upon grace.

Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.¹⁹

Grace—that’s not the poison but the potion on the tip of this last arrow, the one that has gone through the target but should now be stuck in your heart.

Jesus came from the right line at the right time. And it was indeed the right design—designed for sinners like you and me.

3

Conceiving Christ

MATTHEW 1:18–25



WHEN MY SON Simeon was three,¹ he liked to look at the moon. We could be walking through our neighborhood on a partially cloudy night or driving along the highway at the break of dawn, and instead of first noticing the colored Christmas lights on the trees or the cool sports car passing on the left, Simeon would spot the moon. “I see the moon!” he’d belt out from his car seat. “I see the moon,” he’d say, squeezing my hand as we walked.

One night at home his gift for observing the obvious was especially memorable. He turned to the window, and there it was again. “Dad, the moon,” he said softly and with astonishment, as if he had never seen it before. “I know, Simeon,” I replied mildly and with less astonishment. I added playfully, “Do you think you can touch it?” Without hesitation he turned to the window, climbed up the arm of a chair, crossed over onto the windowsill, and reached his right hand up to the sky. He was only 384,403 kilometers shy of it. Discouraged but not dissuaded, he jumped down and ran to the front room, once again finding the moon. “There’s another one,” he yelled. Then he backed up. He ran. He leapt. He reached. This time I swear he almost touched it.

To Simeon the moon’s movements were mysterious, its light lovely, and its texture close enough to touch. Sometimes when we come to passages like Matthew’s condensed Christmas story, we don’t come with that childlike curiosity and wonder—looking at the everyday with awe, perceiving the familiar as fascinating. But we should. We should become like little children, which Jesus said is the only way to get into the kingdom. Here’s how we’ll do it with Matthew 1:18–25. I’ll show you in this text three important yet oftentimes unobserved observations—ones that when seen afresh, I hope will cause you

to see the passage afresh. And perhaps for the first time in a long time, what has become ordinary will once again be extraordinary, as extraordinary as the moon in the eyes of an inquisitive boy.

The Scandal

Let's begin our spiritual coming of age. The first observation is *the scandal surrounding Christ's conception*. Look with me at verses 18, 19. For now I will take out the phrase that de-scandalizes the scene—"from the Holy Spirit." I'll take that out so you can feel some of what Mary and Joseph must have felt. So verses 18, 19 now read:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child. . . . And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

What's going on here? Two facts are clear: Mary is "with child," and consequently Joseph doesn't want to be with her. What is not clear, however (at least not to some modern readers), is how Joseph can be called Mary's "husband" when they are not yet married, and how they are not yet married, but Joseph can divorce her.

The key to solving these riddles is grasping the cultural context. At this time and place in history, "marriage was held to be," as William Barclay somewhat smugly suggests, "far too serious a step to be left to the dictates of the human heart."² As it was for most couples in this culture, Mary and Joseph's parents had likely arranged their marriage. Here's how it worked. First, the fathers of the two families would *engage* the couple. This would usually happen in childhood. Second, later in life, this couple would be *betrothed*. The girl was usually a teenager, and the man was usually older. So to be clear, their *betrothal* is not the same as our *engagement*. Rather, betrothal was the nearest step to marriage. It was the process of ratifying the engagement into which the couple had previously entered.

During the engagement period, the young woman could break the agreement if she was unwilling to marry the man. Conversely, the man could break off the engagement if the woman had not kept her virginity. But once they entered betrothal (which lasted one year), it was absolutely binding. During that year, although they didn't live together or sleep together, the couple was actually known as "husband and wife." This explains why Joseph in our text is called Mary's "husband" (v. 19; cf. Deuteronomy 22:24).³ Now here's the

final point of clarification: the only way a betrothal could be broken was through a legal divorce, which explains what Joseph was up to in verse 19.

So then, do you see the scandal of it all? Mary is pregnant. Yet she is betrothed to Joseph. Joseph is not the father of this baby. Now, if this scenario is still scandalous in our anything-goes, play-by-your-own-rules culture, imagine how it would have been in their anything-does-not-go, abide-by-God's-rules culture.

Mary was in a tough spot. But Matthew reminds us that Joseph's spot wasn't any softer. Mary was the woman whom he agreed to love, the woman who was to have his children and to nurture and teach them. Mary was the woman who was going to manage his household. And she was found out! She was found to be with child, and thus (apparently) with the stain of sexual sin. Worse than that, this baby was not his, biologically speaking. He had not touched her. He knew that. This could only mean that somebody else had.

Stop and think about this. Walk a moment in his shoes. Breathe the air he was breathing. How would you feel if you were in his situation? Would you be humiliated or angry or jealous? Matthew doesn't tell us how Joseph felt. But it is difficult to imagine him so stoic that these emotions never entered his heart.

So what did he do? What could he do? What would you do?

He thought seriously and patiently about the matter,⁴ and then he "resolved" to do what was best for both persons: "And . . . Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly."

Being a just man, he could not simply disregard God's Law (see Deuteronomy 22:23–27), and to marry Mary would have been to do just that. It would have been to overlook an offense that God's Word says should not be overlooked. In fact, it would have been to admit guilt when he was not guilty. In a sense, it would be to lie—"Yes, it's my child; shame on us."

I envision the weight of this decision in this way. On one shoulder Joseph has the righteous requirements of God's Law whispering in his ear, "You have to expose her error. This sin cannot go unpunished." On the other shoulder is the compassion and mercy of God's Law (cf. 23:23). (And note here that it's not a devil and an angel on his shoulders; these are two angels, if you will; two angels wrestling with his heart.) Compassion counsels him, "Joseph, a private divorce is the way to proceed. Dismiss her quietly. In this way you show both the justice and the love of God."

The Spirit

Thankfully, for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus (and us!), God promptly provided an alternative plan. He whisked away these two imaginary angels and sent a real

one. Look with me at verse 20 and we'll fill in the blank that earlier we left in the text: "But as [Joseph] considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'" *From the Holy Spirit* is the second observation I want us to see. We move now from the scandal to the Spirit.

What Joseph was missing was this bit of information, the important information given to us in verse 18 and to Mary during *the annunciation*. After the angel Gabriel gave the news and after Mary said in essence, "How can this be? How can I, a virgin, have a baby?" do you remember how Gabriel responded? He said, "*The Holy Spirit* will come upon you" (Luke 1:35). Now notice in Matthew that this truth is twice emphasized. In verse 18 and here in verse 20 we find the phrase "from the Holy Spirit."

Have you ever thought about the role of the Spirit in the conception of Christ? I'll admit I hadn't until Matthew made me. And now I'm making you. Rest assured I'm not going to delve into the mystery of it all. That is, I'm not going to attempt to describe (for the first time ever!) the supernatural/biological process by which the Spirit worked in the virgin's womb. I am still waiting to be taken up into the third heaven for that revelation. For now I will simply point out the obvious—something as obvious as the moon, something so obvious you will wonder why I'm paid to do this. Here it is: *The Holy Spirit made the preexistent second person of the Trinity into a human being.*

The Spirit genesis-ed Jesus!

Why do I say it that way? Well, because that's how our text actually says it. Verse 18 reads in the original Greek: "Now the *genesis* of Jesus Christ . . ." (cf. 1:1). It is not "the genesis," of course, in the sense of the birth of God's preexistent Son, but rather "the genesis" of the Spirit's work to take the preexistent Son and form his inward parts—to knit him together in his mother's womb, to make him "fearfully and wonderfully" human (cf. Psalm 139:13, 14).

Look how the creed of the First Council of Constantinople (the Nicene Creed of AD 381) summarizes what Scripture teaches here:

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God . . . who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate *by the Holy Spirit* [*ek pneumatou hagiou*—the same as in our Bible text] of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

It was the work of the Holy Spirit to genesis Jesus. Just as the Spirit "was hovering over the face of the waters" at creation (Genesis 1:2), so here for

our salvation the Spirit “overshadowed” Mary’s womb (Luke 1:35), making God’s Son into one of us—with bones and brains and blood, with lungs and lips and lymph nodes, with head and heart and hands.

Here I plea for awe and understanding. We ought to be (again and again!) in awe of the incarnation. But we also ought to understand better the person and doctrine of the Holy Spirit. We ought to grasp not only the necessity of the Spirit’s work in the birth of Christ (i.e., “The Son is not the Son without the Spirit,” as Wolfhart Pannenburg nicely phrases it),⁵ but also that this work of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Christ is a *fleshly* work.⁶ The Spirit’s work is material, tangible, and visible. Ironically, the Spirit’s work is fleshly!

A few years ago, a non-charismatic woman shared with me, a non-charismatic pastor, an interesting episode from a charismatic friend who had just returned from a charismatic retreat. On the retreat there was, as expected, much emphasis on and expression of the spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues. Now, when these two ladies conversed about this—talking about the Holy Spirit—near the end of the conversation, the charismatic Christian said with great astonishment, “Oh, I didn’t know that you even believed in the Holy Spirit!” The assumption behind that remark (I assume) was this: people don’t believe in the Holy Spirit if they don’t talk about him often and if they don’t regularly manifest the *outward* gifts.

I don’t deny in any way that the spiritual gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12—14 are real manifestations of the Holy Spirit. However, I do want to say that *the primary work* of the Holy Spirit is not found in the spiritual gifts. The primary work—or I suppose we should say the primary *works*—of the Holy Spirit are found in creation and in re-creation (i.e., regeneration). And here in our text, as it is often in Scripture, the focus is on the Spirit’s work in creation, this time the creation of God in the flesh.

You see, one of the problems in the church today is that the work of the Holy Spirit is over-spiritualized. Does that sound strange? I suppose it should. But here’s what I mean: where the Holy *Spirit* is present in the world, we see the *humanity* of Jesus believed and even emphasized. Conversely, where other spirits, false or demonic spirits, are at work, we find a Jesus without flesh—a super-spiritualized Jesus, a kind of cosmic Christ.

This was one of the issues the Apostle John dealt with in his three epistles. It was the main theological controversy of his day. To put it plainly, the false teachers forgot about Christmas. They so emphasized Christ’s divinity that they neglected his humanity. And what did John say to that? Here is the apostolic acid test of orthodoxy: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (1 John 4:2).

How do you know if your church is Spirit-filled? One way you can know is if Jesus—in all his heavenly divinity and in all his earthly humanity—is the focus! Frederick Dale Bruner calls this “the Christocentricity of the Spirit.” He explains:

It is my impression from a study of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament (cf. *The Holy Spirit: Shy Member of the Trinity*)⁷ that the true *humanity* of Jesus Christ is one of the two major “lectures” of the Holy Spirit. (The other lecture is, in Paul’s words, the Spirit’s teaching us to say that “Jesus is Lord” (i.e., divine, 1 Cor 12:3). To put this in another way, the Holy Spirit does two major works: first, the Spirit brings Christ *down* to earth and makes him human; second, the Spirit lifts Christ *up* and shows Jesus’ divinity. In other words, the Holy Spirit is a good theologian and gives two main courses: The True Humanity of Jesus Christ the first semester and The True Divinity of Jesus Christ the second. . . . It is the work of the Holy Spirit, in either course, to bring Jesus Christ *into* human lives.⁸

The Holy Spirit has been called the *shy* and *humble* member of the Trinity because it is his divine task to help us exalt the Father and the Son.⁹ So yes, I believe in the Holy Spirit! I say that with some conviction, even charisma. I hope you can say the same.

The role of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Christ—what a wonderful truth to think about on Christmas! It is as obvious as the moon but so often unobserved and undervalued.

The Surrogate

Let’s review. Thus far, we have *the scandal* (the scandal of Christ’s conception) and *the Spirit* (the Spirit’s significant role in Christ’s conception). Finally, we have *the surrogate*, referring to Jesus’ surrogate, earthly father, Joseph.¹⁰

If the Holy Spirit is the shy member of the Holy Trinity, Joseph is the shy member of the holy family. But shy or not, his importance ought to animate our minds.

Look again at this passage before us and see how Matthew writes this story. He starts, quite plainly and straightforwardly, “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way” (1:18). But notice he does not immediately describe *the birth*. There is no nativity. There is no mention of Mary’s labor and delivery. Moreover, unlike Luke’s Gospel, where the reader sees the unfolding events through Mary’s eyes, here in Matthew it is through Joseph’s eyes. Verse 18 introduces the situation. Then the rest of our passage focuses on Joseph and his conception, if you will, of the conception of Christ.

In church tradition Joseph has earned the nickname not “Shy Joseph” but “Quiet Joseph.” That is because he never speaks. That is, in the Gospels we have no record of him uttering a word. But here, while Joseph may indeed be quiet (so to speak), we see how his actions—his “prompt, simple, and unspectacular” obedient actions—speak louder than words (cf. his actions in chapter 2 as well).¹¹ Look again with me, starting in verse 19, and pay attention to Joseph:

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife. . . . She will bear a son, and you [singular] shall call his name Jesus. . . .” When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called [the child’s] name Jesus. (vv. 19–25)

Joseph is the subject of most of the sentences above.

One of the first sermons I ever preached was on Genesis 39, which is the story of Joseph, the son of the patriarch Jacob (cf. 1:2b, 16). In that sermon I showed how the context surrounding the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39) was key to understanding the beginning of salvation history.

You know the story of Joseph, right? The world is still making musicals about it. The story of Joseph starts in Genesis 37, and it is quickly and apparently interrupted in Genesis 38 by the story of Judah and his illicit relationship with Tamar, his widowed daughter-in-law. I mentioned that relationship in the previous chapter. Recall that Judah and Tamar got together when they shouldn’t have and out came the twins—Perez and Zerah.

The question I asked in my Genesis 39 sermon was this: what does Judah have to do with Joseph? What does faithless Judah have to do with faithful Joseph? Why even mention Judah at the start of the grand drama of Joseph? Well, one reason is that he is a foil. Judah’s impurity highlights Joseph’s purity. Judah propositioned his daughter-in-law, who he mistakenly thought was a shrine prostitute. Joseph, on the other hand, was repeatedly propositioned by a powerful (and beautiful?) Egyptian woman and yet resisted each time. The other reason (and the more important one) is this: Joseph, who will come to power in Egypt, will save his brothers’ lives, including Judah’s. This is crucial, we learn at the end of Genesis (Genesis 49:10), because it is through Judah’s offspring that the Christ will come (Hebrews 7:14)—the lion of the tribe of Judah, the ultimate King of God’s people.

Matthew knows the importance of this story (the interweaving of these Genesis stories), and that's why he starts his Gospel about Jesus with a genealogy. Matthew 1:2, 3 states, "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of *Judah* and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar." Now, keep your eyes on those names (as we are following Judah's line) and look ahead to verse 6, which leads us to David—"and Jesse the father of David the king." Now we are getting somewhere! But where? Is this the king we are looking for? Let's keep following Judah's line that has become David's line. Where does this line lead? Look at verse 16. Take your pencil and write next to this verse the word, "Wow!" "And Jacob [not the patriarch] the father of *Joseph* [Joseph who?] the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born."

So why is Joseph, the husband of Mary, so important to Jesus? What does this Joseph have to do with our Jesus? That's the question for this text. Well, you say, he functions as a competent and reliable witness to Mary's virginity (which is so important for the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, mentioned in v. 23).¹² Yes, that's true. But he is much more than that. Look at verse 20. The angel gives away the answer. "Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David . . .'"¹³ There it is! You can also put a "Wow!" next to "son of David." Did you know that other than this reference only Jesus in all the Gospels is called "Son of David"? Which means what? It means that Joseph has royal blood. It means that this humble carpenter (13:55) is from "the house of David" (Luke 1:27). And God promised long ago that a king would come from the line of Judah and from the line of David to reign forevermore. In the annunciation, Mary hears this about her son:

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:32, 33)

Jesus has the right lineage, Scripturally speaking. He is the son of Abraham and the son of David. But how does he get to be the son of David? Is it through Mary? Maybe. Maybe not. Nowhere is that the point, either in Luke or Matthew. Rather, and more certainly, it is through Joseph, his surrogate father!¹⁴

Why is this narrative before us so important? It is important because it shows us how Joseph made Mary's son his own son. That is, he made Jesus his legally. How? Two ways. First, "he took [Mary as] his wife" (v. 24). Second,

“And he [Joseph] called his name Jesus” (v. 25). By accepting Mary as his wife and by naming her child, he officially bestowed upon Jesus “the status of a descendant of David.”¹⁵

Think of the first chapter of Matthew’s Gospel in this way. The first seventeen verses—the genealogy—confirm to us that Jesus is the promised one, and then the last eight verses (with their focus on Joseph) confirm to us that Jesus is truly from the line of David, or as Paul writes, Jesus “was descended from David according to the flesh” (Romans 1:3). The camera lens is wide in verses 1–17 focusing on the big picture of salvation history. It narrows its focus in verses 18–25 upon the holy family—Mary, Jesus, and (don’t forget!) Joseph.

I don’t want to overdo this point, but I should mention (it would be wrong for me not to mention just briefly) how this fits with verses 22, 23.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

That is a quotation of Isaiah 7:14. It speaks of a sign—a virgin conception and birth—that would be given to the “house of David” (Isaiah 7:13). Now, while there is a child born in Isaiah 8, this child is not the full fulfillment of this prophecy. As we read on in Isaiah, especially in Isaiah 9 and 11, we learn of a unique child still to come. There will be a “super-fulfillment” of the prophecy, as Daniel Harrington words it.¹⁶ Isaiah 9:6, 7 reads:

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

So what does Joseph have to do with Jesus? Joseph adopts Jesus into the house of David.

Don’t underestimate the unique role of quiet Joseph. Quiet Joseph quietly bestows upon Jesus this kingly inheritance and right. Joseph the surrogate—might we say that he is as important as the Spirit in this Christmas story?

Seeing like Simeon

Most nights, when my family gathers at the dinner table, we pray before the meal. When one year old Charlotte had already mastered the ritual.¹⁷ Often she would pull herself up onto her chair and say the word “pray.” Then she

would fold her chubby, soft hands together, close her eyes, bow her head, and wait reverently, angelically.

My son Simeon is quite different. He performs no sinless Charlottean ceremony of his own. Instead he squirms into and in his spot, grabs his food with his fingers, shoving some in his mouth, and prays with his mouth full and his eyes wide open. I have never found such boyish behavior acceptable. Yet I will say, looking at this from the broadest and most generous perspective, perhaps the last part of his routine is justifiable and even commendable; perhaps Simeon struggles to close his eyes because he fears he'll miss seeing something spectacular, like a ladybug dancing on the floor or a new moon rising in the sky. And if that is the case, then we can learn something from him. Perhaps each Christmas we should pray with our eyes wide open—open to the creation around us, open to the wonders of God's Word, open to the heavens, never knowing when the One who came in humility will come again in glory, with the stars in his hands and the moon bright beneath his feet.



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