

The Gospel-Given Life Discipleship Revisited

PART TWO: The Disciple and the Church: The Fellowship of Faith

Introduction: The Problem of the Separation of Discipleship and Church

As we noted in Part I, the biblical view of salvation is the key to understanding the biblical notion of discipleship. Discipleship is not first and foremost about what the disciple does for Christ or anyone else for that matter. It is first and foremost about what Christ wants to do for the disciple. In a nutshell, he wants to lead the disciple as sinner through death (understood ultimately as God's judgment upon all that opposes God) into a new life in Christ (understood ultimately as a life reconciled to God). Therefore the call to discipleship, "to follow me," is not a call to imitate Christ's life but to trust Christ with our life, or more precisely, with our death, which is where our life is going in the first place because of our sin and God's law. When Jesus says "follow me," he is inviting us to trust him to manage our death under the promise that he can raise us to new life. The significance of his own death and resurrection is that he has already done just that – namely, conquered death and established the possibility for the new, resurrection life. The call to discipleship is about placing our lives under this death-defeating, new life-creating management of Christ.

But truth be told, the call to discipleship relates us not only to Christ -- and through Christ, in a new way, to God. Even more, as the New Testament makes abundantly clear, the call to discipleship also relates us to all other disciples who also are related to him by virtue of *his call and their faith*. Because there is only one Christ to which the disciple is drawn, the disciple is, therefore, inescapably drawn into relationship with all other disciples. This relationship of all believers to one another through Christ is what we commonly call "the church." Paul called it, among other things, a *koinonia*, a "participation in common things," the common thing being Christ himself. Matthew called it an *ekklesia*, those "called out" of the world to be gathered to Christ. That *koinonia* or *ekklesia* I am calling a fellowship of faith.

Yet, today, we hear over and over again Christians (especially the young) claiming they can be Christian without the church. They assume that discipleship as following Christ and the church as a fellowship of faith are mutually exclusive things. I will by no means attempt here to list the various arguments these separationists, as I will label them, give for justifying this separation. But if my students are representative, their beliefs are rooted in a deep misunderstanding of the biblical notions of discipleship and church, and in a naïve affirmation of the modern ideas of individual autonomy and self-actualization. It is my belief that this comes from the fact that the world is much better at "discipling" the young than is the church.

Of course, we dare not be naïve about the root causes of this tendency to separate the life of discipleship from life in the church. Those who advocate this separation, while woefully deficient in their understanding of both, nevertheless, need to be listened to. That's because their rejection of the church as an integral part of their discipleship emerges from an experience of "the church" that is often in fact harmful to discipleship. Truth be told, what goes by the name of "church" today is often "bourgeois," as Bonhoeffer also labeled it, and in the literal sense of that term. The bourgeois church operates as though "church" is a voluntary organization of like-minded people in which the members (whether clergy or lay or both) define the agenda and determine the admission criteria. In general, the Church is seen by the separationists as an institution that advances a "gospel" that justifies the membership's prevailing way of life. True, the church may drop the name of Jesus and splash their initiates with water and host a meal of bread and wine or grape juice. But the prevailing focus is to turn all this away from any notion of discipleship as accompanying Jesus to the cross and toward a notion of socialization into the group's bourgeois values and practices and habits. The bourgeois church, as the separationists perceive it, tends to want to be known for its ideas about civic and moral virtue (whether liberal or conservative) or its stand on cultural and lifestyle choices (whether traditional or contemporary). While these may be important choices, the separationists know that they do not need a church to underwrite them. And they are right. These things are "human things," they pertain to the law in its critical, political, cultural function in the world. Concerning this, the church has no unique competency. Thus, they are confirmed not only in their belief in individual autonomy and self-actualization, but in the irrelevance of the church to discipleship, to their way of being "Christian" understood as a self-fulfilled person.

In what follows, I will attempt to explain how discipleship and the church are necessarily and inseparably linked and why that is important. The answer presupposes the fact that discipleship is first and foremost about what Christ does for the disciple, a soteriological matter, as argued in Part I. The essence of discipleship is about being "disciple" by Christ. The church becomes an essential piece in this process of discipleship because it is the "people" among whom and "space" in which Christ-discipling actually happens in the world. Characteristic of the Church is that it is a "totality" that is defined by the presence of Christ as opposed to the sum total of its members. Also, it is characterized by a distinctive ethos, namely, Repentance and Forgiveness, and the objective means by which this ethos is maintained is Word and Sacrament. Finally, I will show how Matthew's idea of the priority of the "little ones" helps to give practical focus for evaluating church life and for keeping the community of faith focused on the central thing of forgiveness through faith in Christ ministered through the activity of Word and Sacrament.

The Church as a "Totality" in the Post-Ascension Era

The picture of the church that Matthew's Gospel gives us is striking for its simplicity. The church is simply that company of disciples who "follow Jesus." The definition, if we may call it that, that Matthew's Jesus gives for this simple view of the church is contained in one simple sentence: "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (18:20). The only essential criterion for defining the church, then, is the presence of Jesus Christ. It is that simple. The church's reality is tied neither to the *number of* disciples nor their *outward characteristics*. Moreover, even though it is generally assumed that Matthew's church has some kind of organizational form, that structure in no way enters into Matthew's *essential* definition of the church. As Ray Brown notes, throughout the Gospel of Matthew, and especially in Chapter 18, Matthew gives "practical treatment" of how the church handles such things as disputes between members and bullying of the "little ones" by the mighty ones, but in no way hints at an organizational structure for doing this.¹ Rather, it is always Jesus who is regarded as the one handling matters, as the leader in charge and, hence, the significance of the words, "in his name," in Matthew's definition. This is true even when Matthew reads back into the narrative of the earthly ministry of Jesus a discussion on dispute resolution for his Post-resurrection church in Matthew 18:15-20. It may seem that this is strictly an affair between disciples, but it is not. For when the community is gathered *as church*, and Matthew makes it absolutely clear that that is how they are here gathered (18:15), Jesus is in the midst of them, not casually, not, say, as he is ubiquitously present throughout the cosmos, but authoritatively, as the one who is actually, concretely, leading them, guiding them, and directing them. The word *church*, then, for Matthew is a technical term for a gathering that is authoritatively and definitively under the management of Christ.

The simplicity of this definition of church certainly did not go unnoticed by the early Post-resurrection church. In his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, Ignatius of Antioch, writing in 107 AD, echoes Matthew's definition when he writes, "Wherever Jesus Christ is there is the catholic church."² As historians often note, this is the first time in Christian literature that the word "catholic" is used to describe the church of Christ. In the subsequent nineteen hundred years of church history lots of baggage has been loaded onto that word, "catholic." Some argue that Ignatius himself uses the term to add his own baggage to a definition of the church, specifically, the ingredient of hierarchy. But that, I think, is a misreading of Ignatius. By employing the adjective "catholic" to his describe of the church, Ignatius is simply amplifying, not adding onto, Matthew's Christological definition of Church. Therefore, a better translation of the line would read, "Wherever Jesus Christ is there is church in its totality." He is emphasizing the Christological essence of the church. Christ alone is the defining center of the church.

¹ Ray Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1984), 138-139.

² Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 8, in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 103.

To be sure, Ignatius did think that his times called for bold organizational and leadership moves in order to confess Christ with integrity against the proto-gnostic enemies of the gospel. But this move, as this definition indicates, did not insert human organizational structure as part of the *essential* definition of the church. On the contrary, it asserts that no matter what kind of human accoutrements adorn the church in a particular place, what makes the church “church” is the presence of Jesus Christ and him alone. In establishing an episcopal polity in Antioch, Ignatius did what Peter did at Caesarea Philippi: he simply stepped forward and confessed the gospel (16:13-20), which is what all good bishops are to be about according to the Lutheran Confessions.³ That was not an assertion of human power on his part, but an act of service for the Church. For the “rock” upon which the church stands is nothing other than the confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (16:16). No matter who professes it, that confession has not only the blessing of Christ, but Christ’s further clarification that it was made possible not by “flesh and blood,” meaning, any human construct, hierarchical or otherwise, “but by [Jesus’] Father in Heaven” (16:17). When Ignatius says, “Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the church in its totality,” he is saying that the presence of Jesus Christ is what makes the Church the church. He is saying what Matthew’s Jesus says, when he says “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

It is precisely the issue of the presence of Christ in the Post-ascension Church that concerned Matthew in his day and that still concerns us today. For discipleship, remember, is about being personally disciplined by Christ. And if there is no Christ, there is no Christ-discipling; and if there is no Christ-discipling, there is no church. The church as the fellowship of faith is a natural consequence of, not the principal cause of discipleship. It is also important to remember that Christ-discipling is not primarily a matter of learning information or gaining certain kinds of skills, though both may happen as a consequence. Rather, it is about faith in Christ who promises to lead the disciple, personally, through the sufferings of death into the joys of new life. Discipleship, understood as Christ’s discipling of us, means exactly what Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to me... carrying heaven burdens ... and I will give you rest ... take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... for my yoke is easy, my burden light.”

Matthew’s answer to the question of the presence of Christ in the Post-ascension church is given in Jesus’ parting words to his disciples. Those words are at once simple and profound, and deserve to be quoted at length.

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. **17** When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. **18** And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** 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, **20** and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

³ Book of Concord

The ascension does not mean that the crucified and risen Jesus has abandoned the disciples to some spatial “heaven” and is now absent from their world of space and time, the “earth.” To the contrary, it means that the crucified and risen Christ is now “exalted” in such a way that he is personally present everywhere and always. In a word, he is ubiquitous (as the word “I am with always” indicate) and Lord over all as the words (“all authority has been given to me,” indicate). The promise of his ubiquitous presence is essential to Matthew’s view of the Church as a totality in Christ (versus a human society) and discipleship as personal relationship with Christ (versus imitating a past life). For the only way for the whole world to be discipled by him is for him to be ubiquitous. The church, therefore, is neither a society that Jesus established and left behind for his disciples to run, nor an installed hierarchy that is set apart from the rank and file disciple. No. Jesus makes it clear that even in the post-ascension era, the church is directly under his gracious and heavenly management, which is the management of the whole Godhead, “the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” as he here teaches us. The only difference between the Church before and after the ascension is the *way* Christ is present. In the former he is “locally” present (confined by space-time and seen with human eyes), in the latter he is “ubiquitously” present (in but not confined by space-time and not seen with the eyes).

But the question still remains. Does this ubiquitous Christ in the Post-ascension era still concretely and personally continue to make new disciples? The answer is yes, but not without his present disciples. As the Great Commission states and the experience of the Post-ascension church attests, God’s work of salvation is carried out not only *on* his disciples, but also, without exception, *by* his disciples. Christ’s promise is that he is really and personally present in the activity of his disciples. But which activity of the disciples? Here, too, Matthew is very clear. Christ himself instituted the activity in which he promised to be definitively present for the purposes of making disciples. Matthew summarizes it as “baptizing” in the name of the triune God and “teaching” obedience to all that Christ had commanded, what we often refer to as Word and Sacrament. These activities that are now being done among the disciples in the Post-ascension era are contiguous with the activities being done in the Pre-ascension era. “Baptism” is understood as personal encounter with Christ crucified and raised and places the baptized in the church, among the community of those who belong to Christ. Baptism is contiguous with the early Christ’s call to “follow me” and places us in relation to Christ. “Teaching,” then, is the ongoing process of discipleship. It is contiguous with journeying with Christ and hearing what-all he has to say to us, in light of our daily experience of sin, law and the reality of death: especially, his word of promise that “those who lose their life for [his] sake will find it” (16:25).

We dare not forget that this view of the church is itself an article of faith rooted in the promise of Christ. What a disinterested observer sees in this community is nothing more than an interesting study in human anthropology: a collection of people engaged in the ritual splashing of water and the formal teaching of idiosyncratic, religious, moral and philosophical ideas. But note: it is not that he cannot observe the church as objective activity. Rather, it is that he cannot

experience the church as church, because he lacks faith in the promise. Faith alone is the difference between the believing disciples experience and the disinterested observers experience. Believers experience in this community the work of the crucified and risen Christ (in, with and under these activities of the disciples) leading them through death to new life. Of course, believers could never “prove” their experience to the satisfaction of the disinterested observer as long as the categories of “proof” remain that of disinterested observation. Indeed, from that viewpoint the believer cannot even explain why he or she believes. The most they can say experientially is they have been struck by the message and believe. The best reason they can give for believing is the one Jesus taught them: “flesh and blood has not revealed this, but my Father in Heaven” (16:17). In other words, faith is not a human achievement as we normally understand such things, but it is a human experience. It is the experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, that Spirit that proceeds from the Father and attests to the Son. The only thing the disciple can do is invite the observer into the arena of baptizing and “teaching” and see what happens.

It should be evident now how and why discipleship and church are inseparably linked. Whoever hears rumors of Christ will encounter him personally as Christ-for-them only through the church, the baptizing fellowship of faith. Whoever wishes to be a follower of Christ can do so only as they attach themselves to Christ through the activity of the church, the teaching fellowship of faith. For that is where Christ promises to be encountered and heard “to the end of the age.”

Forgiveness as the Distinctive Ethos of the Church

As we noted earlier, Matthew does not give an organizational treatment of the church, but a “practical treatment,” as Ray Brown described it. That’s because the church is primarily about relationship: the relationship of the disciple to Christ and the corresponding relationship that emerges between the disciples. What Matthew is concerned about is the distinctive quality of that relationship, what might be called the ethos of the Christian community. That ethos, in a word, is “forgiveness,” understood as something that is freely given and received. As ethos, forgiveness is not an episodic activity that might take place in the church. Rather, it *is* the very essence of the Church, and the way of life that ensues between disciples because it is the ethos of Christ: “Go, and earn what this means, ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice’” (9:13).

This is illustrated, specifically, in the incident where Peter asks how often he should forgive a fellow member of the church who sins against him (18:21-22). As Ray Brown notes, Peter is more than generous, as the world views generosity, when he suggests to Jesus “seven times” as an appropriate number to forgive an incessantly offending member.⁴ But to reduce

⁴Brown, 144.

Jesus' concept of forgiveness to a question of calculus is to miss the point. Jesus' exorbitant number of "seventy-seven times" is not a disagreement on the calculus of forgiveness. Rather, it is Jesus' way of saying that forgiveness is not a quantitative, but a qualitative feature of church life. Forgiveness is the way of the church, because forgiveness is the way of the gospel.

This stands in stark contrast to the way of the world. The world operates on the basis of a very different ethos, the ethos of law and retribution as opposed to the ethos of gospel and forgiveness. Both, of course, have their source in God, as Matthew makes preeminently clear in the Sermon on the Mount. But they represent very different kinds of relationships, both before God and before fellow human beings. The ethos of the world is characterized by "pay up or suffer the consequence" (cf. 5:25-26, 18:35). The result is that the offending party suffers the consequences alone and is estranged from the offended party. The ethos of the church, by contrast, is characterized by "you're forgiven, be reconciled." The result of this is that the offended party bears the consequences for the sake of winning the offending party back.

It is important to note that Jesus does not forbid his disciples from operating in the world by its ethos of the law. After all, it is God's law and it does have a civic function of restraining sinners and keeping the flow of God's desired goods and services going in the world. Therefore, in the Sermon on Mount, Jesus says "In everything do to others as you would have them do unto you; for this is the law and the prophets" (6:12). By "everything," Jesus here means everything that pertains to life in this world. Like the things we tend to worry about, what to eat, what to drink, what to wear (6:25-33). The disciple's heavenly Father knows they need them, and God says that those things will be provided to the disciple in the same way they are provided to everyone else -- through the workings of the law. But this must be remembered. Participating in that legal reality, though important for life in this world "today," neither endears a person to God nor spares them the judgment of God. The same law that keeps goods and services flowing throughout the nations (cf. 6:32), also eventually puts them to death. For this reason, Jesus concludes his discussion of this theme with the words, "Seek first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (6:33).

Matthew was chiefly concerned about the way these two kinds of ethos were confused and manipulated by members of his church *in the church*. Unfortunately, some of his most strident attempts to untangle the confusion and to assert the stark incompatibility of these two kinds of ethos have tragically led to further confusion and to a legalistic reading of Matthew. Only if one understands how to properly distinguish law and gospel, can this confusion be cleared up. Matthew, in my judgment, does make an honest attempt to do that. One example that we mentioned in Part I is his use of Hosea 6:6 in Matthew 9:13 (with regard to his eating with Matthew) and 12:7 (when the disciples unlawfully pick grain on the Sabbath): "Go learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" But he also tries to set forth this law/gospel hermeneutic, in my judgment, in Matthew 13: 51-53. I quote it at length.

⁵¹ ‘Have you understood all this [referring to the parables of the kingdom]?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’ ⁵²And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’ ⁵³When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

If Ray Brown is correct in asserting that Matthew is making reference to himself in this passage (that he is the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven), then Matthew is saying to his own readers, you cannot understand what I am saying here unless you know how to distinguish “what is new” (the gospel) and “what is old” (the law) from among the works of God. Indeed, as Matthew says in 9:17, not to properly distinguish them is like putting “new wine (gospel) in old wine skins (law).” The result will be disastrous. The old skins will be destroyed and the new wine will be lost.

Chapter 18 is Matthew’s attempt to show how to distinguish law and gospel in light of practical issues that exist in his church. We will look at three. The first is Matthew 18:15-20. It has to do with a brother who doesn’t want to admit he needs forgiveness. The second is Matthew 18:21-22. It has to do with Peter’s question about the extent of forgiveness that we briefly touched on earlier. The third is Matthew 18:23-35. It is a parable that has to do with man who wants to have it both ways, be forgiven but not forgiving.

If we envision Matthew 18:15-20 as an ecclesiastical court to justify excommunicating a member of the church so we no longer need to concern ourselves with them, we have totally missed the point. Then we have turned what is an exercise in the gospel into an exercise of the law. The problem is real enough: Christians do sin against one another. The church as Matthew presents it is not a gathering of the sinless but a gathering of the forgiven. But the concern in this passage of the “you” who has been sinned against is not about bringing suit against the offender and making him pay restitution. Rather, the concern of the “you” is wholly and completely for the wellbeing of the one who has sinned. The concern is that he might be forgiven. Why? Because unforgiven sinners “lose their life,” forgiven sinners “find their life” (16:25). The incident is all about this “you” drawing on all the resources of the church to do all in its power to save this sinner. That, after all, is its ethos! But forgiveness by its very nature is an offer to be received, freely, by faith, not a demand that can be imposed by force. And as this passage makes clear, sometimes the gospel is not received. That, too, unfortunately, is a real possibility. In such cases, how should the “you” regard such a person? Answer, as a “Gentile and a tax collector,” that is, as one who remains the very focus of the gospel.

Three things are highly significant here. First, the gospel is not a cheap thing. The “you” here doesn’t act as though the offense doesn’t matter and the gospel is not needed. It matters deeply that this offender remains unforgiven. But, second, that in no way means that the “you” who is offended will dissociate from the offender. It means that the “you” will constantly be

concerned about the wellbeing of this unforgiven sinner. Forgiveness is the ethos of this “you” as it is of the whole church. Third. The fact that forgiveness was not received and that the person remains “bound” is not the fault of the “you.” The success or failure the ministry of reconciliation is ultimately in God’s hands. That, I’m suggesting, is the meaning of Matthew 18:18 on “binding and loosing.”

Matthew 18:21-22 is Peter’s question about the extent of forgiveness. Jesus’ response, as we said earlier, is that there is no limit to forgiveness. Again, the very question underscores the fact that the church is not a community of the sinless, but of the forgiven. The fact that the offending member is a repeat offender makes no difference. It is a basic assumption here that forgiveness is something that Christ’s disciples need continuously throughout their entire life. Christians will be repeat offenders. But that does not contradict the nature of the church. What would contradict the nature of the church is the refusal of a disciple to forgive a fellow disciple who is repentant, who believes in the need of the forgiveness of sins. Consequently, the forgiveness Christ gives knows no limits. Jesus’ remark to Peter about forgiving the offender “Seventy-Seven times” is a euphemism for that fact forgiveness is simply the church’s way of life, the ethos of the church.

Matthew 18:23-35 is all about the duplicity of heart that potentially endangers every disciple. A slave is forgiven billions of dollars by the king and, then, refuses to forgive his fellow slave the ten dollars owed him. The duplicity is that he is trying to have it both ways: play by the ethos of mercy when he’s the debtor and the ethos of sacrifice when he’s the creditor. Matthew is quite aware of the possibility of a disciple, in one moment repenting and receiving forgiveness, and, then, in another moment, refusing to forgive others as they have been forgiven. Indeed, much of Matthew’s discussion around forgiveness is focused precisely on this issue. A particular case in point is the petition on forgiveness in the so-called Lord’s Prayer: “And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (6:12). So intent is Matthew on underscoring forgiveness, not as an episodic transaction but as the ethos of the church, that he amplify the point in the prayer with commentary: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Father in heaven will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others neither will your Father forgive our trespasses” (6:14-15).

What are we to make of this? Certainly not that God’s forgiveness is a payment for our forgiving others. Such would totally obliterate the gift character, not only of forgiveness, but of faith. It would also contradict Matthew’s own law-gospel hermeneutic that he learned from Hosea 6:6: “I desire mercy not sacrifice.” No. The only thing I can make of this is that Matthew is keenly aware of just how dangerous life in this world is for the disciple. The human heart is a battle ground between desiring mercy and desiring sacrifice, between faith and unfaith. The disciple should not take that for granted.

That the church is an ethos of forgiveness is true! That disciples, as members of the church, are to live out that ethos is also true! But the stability of the church as an ethos of forgiveness is not ultimately rooted in the disciples. Disciples are always weak and fragile in faith. This is apparent from the fact that throughout the Gospel, Matthew presents Jesus as say, over and over again, to his disciples: "O you of little faith" (8:26, 14:31, 16:8, 17:20). So where is the stability of the church as an ethos of forgiveness grounded? It is in Christ himself and the means of grace -- the activity of baptizing and teaching that he has given to the church do. As long as these things are happening Christ is present and the church is an ethos of forgiveness. That activity is also the only remedy for the duplicity of heart that threatens every disciple. So in a sense, Chapter 18 comes full circle, back to the idea of a church that never gives up on the unforgiven offender. For it is of the church's very nature -- its very ethos -- to pursue forgiveness for everyone, to desire mercy and not sacrifice.

The Priority of the "Little Ones"

As we said earlier, drawing on the insights of Ray Brown, Matthew is much more interested in a "practical treatment" of the Church than an organizational one. That's because for him the church is defined by its ethos of forgiveness and is, therefore, the locus of a reconciliation that begins with the relationship between God and humanity and extends into the relationship between disciples. One of the practical implications of this for Matthew is that the Church has a preferential option for, what he calls, the "little ones."

Exactly who these "little ones" are sociologically speaking is debatable. It has been suggested that they are recent converts, new comers to the community, who therefore have no standing or seniority in the community. This lack of seniority need not necessarily be defined in reference to a formal leadership structure. It may very well be like the informal power arrangements that exist in our congregations today. We all know of those who, for whatever reason, have come to be the ones who call the shots and guard the "traditions of the elders" (cf. 15:1-9) so to speak. In the eyes of these guardians, these new comers may be seen as a threat to the way we've always done things or the in informal power arrangement that get things done. The other possibility is that the "little ones" represent those who lack the requisite gifts (spiritual or financial) that can help the community thrive from a social point of view. They may be the poor or sick or have checkered backgrounds. Whatever the deficiency may be, they, in short, need more from the community than they can give. In a word, they are dependent, like children (18:1-5), and for that reason Jesus uses a child to illustrate his point. Matthew 25 may be a representative list of these needy ones.

In my judgment, the term "little ones" is general enough to cover all these sociological possibilities and more. What is crucial with regard to the identities of these "little ones" is that Jesus identifies them as "those who believe in me" (18:6). For Jesus that which connects the

members of the Christian community together is not that they share the common values of a bourgeois culture (whether of a Jewish or the Gentile style) or that they continue in the “tradition of the elders,” or are especially rich in spiritual gifts. What is common is that they all share in the one Jesus Christ by faith. What is central is that they are being made into Christ’s disciples, that they are people who know the secret of the Kingdom of heaven, the plan of salvation, and that all this comes to them through the community’s activity of baptizing and teaching – including the teaching of Jesus here concerning the “little ones.”

What needs to be seen is that, with regard to faith, all disciples are “little ones,” regardless of what “gifts” and “strengths” they may possess. The phrase, “little ones,” I believe, has its correlate in Matthew’s Gospel in the phrase, “you of little faith.” Over and over again, Jesus identifies this deficiency in his “leading disciples,” if I may call them that. Therefore, Jesus’ concern to give priority to the “little ones” is not at all an exclusionary priority. The problem is that the talented and wealthy and powerful members of the community are excluding themselves by not seeing that that category of “little ones” also applies to them. Therefore, as an act of pastoral concern, Jesus says to his “leading disciples,” who asked about the meaning of greatness in the Kingdom: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (18:3-4). When it comes to faith, all are “little ones,” all are dependent, all need to be constantly disciplined by Christ through the baptizing and teach activity of the church. Accepting that humbling truth about ourselves, that we forever remain dependent and in need of Christ’s discipling, is precisely what makes us “great”! Such humility is faith at its best.

It is important to note that Jesus is not giving, here, a “social teaching” *per se*. Rather, he is giving an “ecclesiastical teaching” that follows from his own ministry to offer, free of charge, the forgiveness of sins and the promise of new life to all who believe. It’s not that social matters are not important. They are. But Jesus has no fundamental message to give about social matters, except “what is old,” what has always been said about them: that they fall under law of retribution. This is true believer and unbelievers alike. One of the few lines on “social teaching” by Jesus is given in Matthew 6:12, which we referred to earlier: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; this is the law and the prophets.” The phrase, “do to others as you would have them do to you” is Jesus’ definition of basic social fairness. That is the ethos of the law. But that is not the ethos of the church. If it were, the “little ones” would be lost. The ethos of the Kingdom is the opposite of this, as illustrated when Jesus sent out the twelve two by two: “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment” (10:8).

On the basis of this notion of the “priority of the little ones,” Matthew brings forth at least three practical words of instruction for his community. The First concerns leadership. Although Matthew says nothing about the organizational structure of his community, he says a lot about the nature of leadership. One example is the request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee that they rise to power when Jesus comes into his kingdom. First, I’m amazed at Jesus’ restraint at such an audacious request. Second, we need to remember that the Zebedee boys came over to Jesus from the Zealot party. For them power was coercive power to get things done. Third, Jesus says he has no say in such things. Is Matthew saying here that whatever authority structure exists in the church is not one that Jesus set in place? I think so. That doesn’t mean that the church may not set up an authority structure, but that if it does, it is at best provisional, a human, not a divine thing. The main point concerning leadership, however, comes when the other disciples hear about the audacity of the Zebedee boys. Jesus teaching is clear. The purpose of leadership in the church is not about personal advancement or status over others. Rather, it’s about being a servant to others. Christ’s own leadership provides the clue. He is one who rules by dying for his subjects, that they may live. That is the opposite of the world’s view of leadership. The subjects are to serve the king that he might live.

A second practical implication that Matthew draws out of this idea of the priority of the “little ones,” is that everyone is responsible for the wellbeing of the “little ones” (18:6-7) “If any of you,” he says, “puts a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe” and causes them to fall, that is, to lose their faith, “it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” The church is a place, in a sense, where everyone is to be a leader, understood as a servant to the “little ones.” Regardless of what formal role a disciple may have in the church, their words and actions matter because they can become either a rock to support faith or a stumbling block to tumble faith. In many ways this issue remains today the single most problem in the church today. The young, especially, can be scandalized by the bullying and bickering behavior that goes on in the Church.

Of course, Matthew is aware that disciples as “little ones” can also be a stumbling block unto themselves, too. They might have expectations or desires or behaviors or habits or attitudes that are destructive to faith and in need to be amputated (18:8-9). Concerning third practical implication of the priority of the “little ones,” Matthew says it is important that the community of faith not “despise them.” They need help. They need someone to walk with them. In Matthew’s Gospel, this third situation leads into the discussion of that process of pastoral concern that, as I said earlier, is often misunderstood as a court of excommunication. It is not. It is about marshalling all the resources of the Christian community to build up the faith of the “little ones.”

In sum, we have seen how Matthew’s view the church is a totality in Christ and not a human society. Christ still leads the church, albeit not without his disciples, but as they are actively engaged in baptizing and teaching. Second. We have seen that the essence of the

church is its ethos of forgiveness and that to mix that ethos with the ethos of law, the ethos of “payback” is to destroy both. Accordingly, the stability of the church as an ethos of forgiveness does not depend on the person of the disciple, but upon the presence of the person of Christ and the activity of Word and Sacrament he instituted. Finally, we have seen that the idea of the priority of the “little ones” was employed by Matthew to help to give practical focus for evaluating the Churches ministry and ethos. It is my hope that this discussion will help us to better understand how the church and discipleship are inseparably linked and what practical considerations we need to make if we are fulfill the great commission to go and make disciples of all nations.

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