

MATTHEW AMONG THE DISPENSATIONALISTS

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a senior in high school, some people cared enough about me to tell me that God loved me and Jesus Christ died for me. When I believed the gospel, they gave me a *Scofield Reference Bible* and urged me to study it, both above and below the line. When the *New Scofield Reference Bible* came out in 1967, it was weighed and found wanting: “the old was better.” I was taught that the Gospel according to John was to be preferred to that of Matthew. Matthew was a kingdom Gospel for the Jews, and for Gentiles like me, salvation was by grace through faith, not by repentance. The Lord’s prayer was to be found in John 17, not Matthew 6. The church’s marching orders were found in John 20, not Matthew 28.¹ Although I owe my spiritual parents a debt that I cannot repay, ongoing studies of the Scriptures have convinced me that their views on these matters were mistaken.

This study addresses some key issues in the Gospel according to Matthew which are related to dispensationalisms, both traditional and progressive.² The views advocated here will be generally favored by those who identify themselves as progressive dispensationalists,³ but the goal of the study is to isolate key issues for further discussion. Two assumptions should be made clear. First, the idea that Matthew is a Gospel written to Jews, as opposed to Gentiles, with the inference that Matthew’s “gospel” message is an apologetic for Jews, as opposed to the rest of humanity, is mistaken.⁴ Rather,

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¹ Teachings such as these are not necessarily normative in mainstream dispensationalism, but many can provide anecdotal support as to their currency.

² Since it appears that the difference between traditional and progressive dispensationalists is mainly over the continuity/discontinuity of Israel/church, law/grace, and so on, the term “discontinuity dispensationalism/ist” will be used to describe the traditional position. But the term “progressive” will be used for “continuity dispensationalism” because of its pride of place. I do not intend by these terms disdain toward or doubt about the orthodoxy of any dispensationalists.

³ One of the goals of my work with Matthew has been to reflect the progressive dispensational project. See D. L. Turner, *Matthew* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 4.

⁴ Dispensationalists who have argued in this manner tend to view Matthew as (1) an apologetic aimed to convert Jews; and/or (2) as a historical record which demonstrates Israel’s guilt for rejecting Jesus and the kingdom. For example, J. F. Walvoord is solidly behind the first view in *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 12–13. W. Kelly seems to blend the first two views in *Lectures on Matthew* (New York: Loizeaux, 1911) 5, 9–12. W. H. Griffith Thomas is similar to Kelly in his *Outline Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 16–17. S. D. Toussaint adds to the first view above the goal of presenting the kingdom program of God. See *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980) 18–20.

Matthew is a Gospel written to followers of Jesus, most of whom who happen to be Jewish, explaining to them how Jesus is related to Moses and the prophets and calling them to obey Jesus' universal mission mandate, a mandate in keeping with Israel's historic biblical role in the world.⁵ Recent studies of gospel genre and audience, if valid, caution against the circular process of hypothetically reconstructed narrow local "communities" functioning as confident assumptions which guide exegesis.⁶ Second, the notion that the differences between dispensationalisms, let alone between dispensationalism and non-dispensational systems, are mainly due to disparate hermeneutical theories, is also mistaken.⁷ Consistent "literal" hermeneutics has never been the sole domain of dispensationalists. Differences in exegetical conclusions are not primarily due to competing hermeneutical methods but due to individual applications of a common methodology, different views on the complex matter of biblical intertextuality, the subtle yet real influence of presuppositions, the uneven rigor of exegetical efforts, and our common human foibles and finiteness.⁸

The following *cruces* have been engaged in summary fashion:

- (1) Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 24:14 and the "offer" of the kingdom;
- (2) the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7;
- (3) the parables of Matthew 13;
- (4) the kingdom and the church in Matt 16:18–19;
- (5) the taking and giving of the kingdom in Matt 21:43;
- (6) the kingdom in the eschatological discourse of Matthew 24–25; and
- (7) Jesus' commission in Matt 28:19–20.

⁵ H. A. Kent Jr.'s brief comments on this matter are much preferable to those of other commentators cited above. See "The Gospel according to Matthew," *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1962) 929. L. A. Barbieri thinks that both Jewish evangelism and encouragement of Jewish believers are purposes of Matthew. See "Matthew," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (2 vols.; ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck; Wheaton: Victor, 1983) 2.16.

⁶ See, e.g., R. Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). The several scholars who contribute to this seminal volume seem to agree that the Gospels are to be interpreted along the same lines as Hellenistic bi/oi which were written not to specific local communities but to geographically widespread people who shared a common interest—Jesus. One should not miss the obvious in the above title—the Gospels were written for *Christians*, whatever their ethnicity.

⁷ Against, among others, T. D. Ice, "Dispensational Hermeneutics," in *Issues in Dispensationalism* (ed. W. R. Willis and J. R. Master; Chicago: Moody, 1994) 29–49; C. C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995) esp. 79–104. Summaries of hermeneutics from a progressive dispensational viewpoint may be found in R. L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 19–21, 29–30; C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1993) 57–105. See also D. L. Turner "The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues," *GTJ* 6 (1985) 275–87; and idem, "The New Jerusalem in Rev 21:1–22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (ed. C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 264–92.

⁸ See the helpful and nuanced discussion of dispensational hermeneutics in D. S. DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America during the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 2002) 77–131.

These topics obviously do not exhaust the Matthean themes which are relevant for discussions among dispensationalists, yet these more than others will illustrate areas of difference, and facilitate evaluation of competing models of understanding Matthew. This study sketches the reception of Matthew by dispensationalists and provides a progressive dispensational biblical theology of the kingdom of God in Matthew. This is not a detailed exegesis of any one text or theme. Limited space tends to truncate engagement with supporting arguments and evidence. Citations of other scholars are mainly intramural but this does not imply disdain toward non-dispensationalists. Dispensationalists should be reminded that there is more at stake here than determining who are franchised as card-carrying members of a society for dispensational mutual admiration. Infinitely more important is the obligation to handle the word of God accurately and to live *coram Deo* as salt and light in this world.

I. MATTHEW 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 24:14
AND THE OFFER OF THE KINGDOM

Matthew's identical presentation of John's (3:2) and Jesus' (4:17) announcement of God's reign (μετανοεῖτε· ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν) amounts to an ethical imperative based on an eschatological indicative. Jesus' ministry is summarized in a Matthean *inclusio* (4:22; 9:35), which similarly describes Jesus' message as κηρῦσσω τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας. Two other similar texts are relevant, 10:7 and 24:14. The former passage summarizes the message proclaimed by the Twelve in their initial mission (κηρῦσσετε λέγοντες ὅτι ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν) and the latter the future message to be proclaimed by the church until the end comes (καὶ κηρυχθήσεται τοῦτο τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ εἰς μαρτύριον πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν). All four texts center on the kingdom as the heart of the message proclaimed by John, Jesus, the Twelve, and the church (cf. Matt 13:19, τὸν λόγον τῆς βασιλείας). As Matthew's narrative develops, the ethical imperative remains the same while the eschatological indicative progressively develops.

This is not the place for detailed discussion of various views of the kingdom in Matthew.⁹ A progressive dispensational view is stated and contrasted with the views of discontinuity dispensationalists.¹⁰ Two assumptions undergird

⁹ See Turner, *Matthew* (BECNT) 37–44.

¹⁰ Among other treatments see especially the invaluable survey of M. L. Bailey, "Dispensational Definitions of the Kingdom," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell* (ed. C. H. Dyer and R. B. Zuck; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 201–21. See also C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1993) 212–83; D. K. Lowery, "Evidence from Matthew," in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus* (ed. D. K. Campbell and J. L. Townsend; Chicago: Moody, 1992) 165–80; A. J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody, 1959); R. D. Moore, "What Hath Dallas To Do with Westminster? The Kingdom Concept in Contemporary Evangelical Theology," *CTR* n.s. 2 (2004) 35–49; S. J. Nichols, "The Dispensational View of the Davidic Kingdom: A Response to Progressive Dispensationalism," *The Masters Seminary Journal* 7 (1996) 213–39; J. D. Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton: Victor, 1990); M. L. Saucy, "The Kingdom-of-God Sayings in

the discussion. First, Matthew's "kingdom of heaven" should not be distinguished from the "kingdom of God."¹¹ Second, when comprehensively studied through Matthew, the kingdom has both present/dynamic/internal/ethical aspects and future/static/external/political aspects.¹²

Generally the kingdom of heaven refers to the nearness or even presence of the rule of God in the person, works, and teaching of Jesus (3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 11:12; cf. 12:28), but there are times when it implies (5:19; 7:21; 13:24, 47; 25:1) or describes (8:11; cf. 6:10; 13:38–43; 25:34; 26:29) the future reign of Jesus upon the earth. Texts like Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 24:14 do not *primarily* portray an offer of a future kingdom¹³ but rather an evangelistic appeal for immediate individual conversion and discipleship, motivated by the immanence of the kingdom. Hypothetical "what if" questions about the possibility of national repentance leading to a physical kingdom apart from the cross are ultimately as unanswerable as the similar question about the sin of our first parents in Eden.¹⁴ Redemptive history on the other hand is knowable, and as it unfolds, the indicative content of this kingdom message becomes more developed although the imperative demand remains the same. John the Baptist, Jesus, the Twelve, and the church all preach essentially the same message. Their respective audiences are summoned to turn their lives over to the Messiah Jesus, whose identity and mission become progressively clearer, especially in light of the cross, the resurrection, and the coming of the Spirit.

A common and helpful way to describe the dynamic nature of God's reign is to say that it has been inaugurated at Jesus' first coming and will be con-

Matthew," *BSac* 151 (1994) 175–97; R. L. Saucy, *Case* 81–110; S. D. Toussaint, "The Kingdom in Matthew's Gospel," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost* (ed. S. D. Toussaint and C. H. Dyer; Chicago: Moody, 1986) 19–34.

¹¹ Against, among others, L. S. Chafer, *The Kingdom of God in Prophecy* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1936) 52–55; C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1909), on Matt 3:2 (996 n. 1) and Matt 6:33 (1003 n. 1). The distinction is also found in J. F. Walvoord, *Matthew* 30–31. McClain (*Greatness* 20–21) seems non-committal on the issue. Barbieri ("Matthew" 2.49) maintains the distinction that the kingdom of God includes only believers while the kingdom of heaven includes both believers and unbelievers. Erich Sauer, generally identified as a dispensationalist, saw no distinction. See *The Triumph of the Crucified* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 23. S. D. Toussaint believes the two terms are interchangeable and that both always refer to a future earthly kingdom. See *Behold the King* 65–68. Ryrie (*Dispensationalism* 154–55) believes the issue is "not at all determinative," and "minor league unimportant stuff." Saucy sees no distinction but agrees with Ryrie that it is minor issue (*Case* 19).

¹² The influence of G. E. Ladd should be acknowledged. See *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), esp. 105–261. The gratuitous *ad hominem* argument that progressive dispensationalism's acceptance of an already-not yet kingdom inevitably places it on the slippery slope to covenant premillennialism (see, e.g., Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* 178) is inappropriate and ill-advised. On the kingdom as both present and future in the teachings of Jesus, see also Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 232–54; D. L. Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," in *Israel, the Church, and Dispensationalism* 37–67; Saucy, *Case* 94–102.

¹³ S. D. Toussaint, a prominent proponent of the offer/rejection/postponement view, acknowledges that "the basic theses of dispensationalism do not rise or fall" on it. See "The Contingency of the Coming of the Kingdom," in Dyer and Zuck, *Integrity of Heart* 223.

¹⁴ R. L. Saucy, *Case* 90–94; Toussaint, "Contingency"; Toussaint and J. A. Quine, "No, Not Yet: the Contingency of God's Promised Kingdom," *BSac* 164 (2007) 131–47.

summed when he returns. John, Jesus, and the disciples announce the dawning of the kingdom (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). Those who repent at this message of God's rule already begin to experience the reality the kingdom (5:3, 10).¹⁵ Jesus' kingdom requires a radical righteousness greater than that of the legal experts (5:19–20); it requires disciples to seek it first, before their daily needs (6:33). Even John's greatness as a prophet of the kingdom is eclipsed by the least one who experiences eschatological kingdom realities (11:11–12). The royal power of God is dynamically present in Jesus' words and works (esp. 12:28). The preaching of the kingdom and responses to it are presented figuratively in the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13, and its authority is further symbolized by the keys of Matt 16:19. Entrance into this kingdom requires childlike humility (18:3–4; 19:14).

But this stress on the kingdom as the present dynamic rule of God exists alongside eschatological hope for a full manifestation of God's rule on earth (6:10). Those who have already experienced the kingdom's power (5:3, 10) will someday receive it in full measure (5:4–9).¹⁶ In the meantime, their longing and lifestyle center on greater approximation of kingdom righteousness on earth (6:9–10, 33). The unknown time of the arrival of the future kingdom mandates constant alertness (25:1–14). At the return of Jesus the Son of Man, the entire world will come under God's rule (7:21–23; 25:31, 34). In light of the presence of the future in the kingdom, it should not be said that the kingdom at present does not involve a concrete realm. It is rather that the kingdom exists as a microcosm today and as a macrocosm when Jesus returns. Today, the rule of God is shown in the lives of believers individually, corporately, and as they relate to the world. In that day, God's rule will be extended to all mankind in judgment or redemption.

The many dispensationalists who have argued that the kingdom announced in Matthew is the kingdom announced by the biblical prophets are correct. Yet the discontinuity dispensational teaching that when Israel as a nation did not repent, the kingdom *per se* was postponed, is mistaken. The absence of a political kingdom, a millennium, as it were, should not be equated with a hiatus in God's saving rule.¹⁷ Rather, the kingdom message summons those who hear it to turn their lives in the direction announced by Jesus with the expectation that God's reign is beginning and will be even more extensive and intensive in the future. Granted, relatively few of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries did repent, but those who did began to experience the blessings associated with the kingdom (5:3–10). These who took the narrow path, who bore good fruit, and who built houses on the rock (7:13–27) genuinely experienced the saving power of God and became sons and daughters of the kingdom (13:38). At the final judgment, after the unbelievers have been gathered

¹⁵ The eight beatitudes are bracketed by two (5:3, 10) which have an identical causal clause which affirms the present possession of the blessings of the kingdom: ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

¹⁶ The middle six beatitudes (Matt 5:4–9) uniformly use the future tense in their causal clauses to speak of the eschatological blessings which will come to disciples.

¹⁷ See the helpful discussions of the proclamation and rejection of the kingdom in DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology* 315–21; Saucy, *Case* 82–94.

out of the kingdom, the believers' partial yet genuine participation in God's saving reign will be unspeakably intensified as they shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom (13:43; cf. Dan 12:3).¹⁸

A common problem in discussions of the kingdom is that complementary "both . . . and" concepts have been handled by both dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists as if they are contradictory "either . . . or concepts." This is illustrated by an exchange between Ryrie and Ladd in which Ryrie, in response to Ladd's spiritual view of the announced kingdom, argued that Jesus offered a physical kingdom to Israel.¹⁹ But these two views are not mutually exclusive; the kingdom, when understood comprehensively in light of its full biblical exposition, is both physical (against Ladd's emphasis) and spiritual (against Ryrie's emphasis). The terms "physical" and "spiritual," as they are used in this debate, are not contradictory, and this is not a valid case of the law of the excluded middle. Ladd was not wrong in affirming that the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus is primarily spiritual, but rather, in denying that it is physical, at least contingently, in the teaching of Jesus. Likewise, Ryrie was not wrong in affirming in light of biblical prophecy that God intends to rule over his creation through Jesus the Messiah, but rather, in not emphasizing that this rule must begin in people's hearts.²⁰

If the present/future spiritual/physical view of the kingdom just sketched is valid, discontinuity dispensationalism's bifurcation of repentance in Matthew's gospel and faith in John's, and of Matthew's kingdom gospel and Paul's "grace gospel,"²¹ cannot be sustained. Along the same lines, if the kingdom Jesus proclaimed is only an offered, rejected, and postponed political entity, there remains little continuity between the message the king preached and the message his church believes. What is more, the church is left without the resource of the kingly authority of Jesus (Matt 28:18) in its present ministry. Meaningful continuity between the church's experience and that of Israel, the biblical people of God, is diminished in a manner contradicted by

¹⁸ A key Matthean text on the presence of the kingdom is 12:28–29, where Jesus affirms that his exorcisms demonstrate the presence of God's reign (ἐφθασεν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) which in some sense binds Satan. Discontinuity dispensationalists have difficulties with this text because of their commitment to kingdom as an offered, rejected, postponed, political entity. McClain (*Greatness* 301) saw only imminence here, not presence. Similarly, Toussaint (*Behold the King* 164) only speaks of the temporary nearness of kingdom and dubiously uses the aorist tense of ἐφθασεν to argue that it did not remain near. Yet in another place Toussaint speaks of Jesus' exorcisms as beginning to show the power which will fully bind Satan in the future (see "Kingdom in Matthew" 28). Surprisingly, this way of speaking is not unlike the already-not yet language of Ladd.

¹⁹ Ryrie (*Dispensationalism* 152–53) provides a rejoinder to a charge made by Ladd in *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 152–53.

²⁰ In fairness to both Ryrie and Ladd, it should be noted that Ladd as a premillennialist did not deny that the kingdom would at least ultimately be physical, and that Ryrie took pains to argue that his conception of the physical kingdom was not incompatible with its spirituality (*Dispensationalism* 153–54, 157–58). The question is one of balancing these two aspects of God's reign.

²¹ As did, e.g., A. C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 2 vols. (1910, repr. Wheaton: Van Kampen, n.d.) 1.11, 64, 103, 207; 2.189–91, 323–24. See also C. F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 1971) 321–34. These are especially egregious examples, but others could be supplied.

the extensive intertextuality found in the Christian Bible. When the church's experience of dynamic ethical transference from Satan's kingdom to Christ's kingdom is viewed as merely judicial, *de jure* rather than *de facto*,²² things have gotten out of hand. We may be thankful that discontinuity dispensationalism's practice has been better than its theology of a church bifurcated from God's kingdom.²³

II. THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (MATTHEW 5–7)

Martin's 1986 essay surveyed varying dispensationalist views of the Sermon on the Mount²⁴ and argued that no one view should be regarded as normative. Yet what Martin called the "kingdom view" was widespread among earlier dispensationalists who wished to maintain a strong distinction between the kingdom and the church and between law and grace.²⁵ Such dispensationalists did not take the sermon as directly relevant for the church. Martin also held that the "penitential view," that the Sermon's high standards are designed to convict people and bring them to faith,²⁶ had currency among dispensationalists, but it is difficult to find dispensationalists who hold it.²⁷ Martin pointed out that the interim ethic view was attractive to those like Toussaint who understand the kingdom to be strictly future.²⁸

²² See, e.g., McClain's treatment of Col 1:13 in *Greatness* 435–36.

²³ Blaising and Bock conclude that the church is an inaugurated form of the future kingdom of God and then explain how this view impacts church and ministry in *Progressive Dispensationalism* 285–91.

²⁴ J. Martin, "Dispensational Approaches to the Sermon on the Mount," in Toussaint and Dyer, *Essays in Honor of Pentecost* 35–48. Martin expanded this material in "Christ, the Fulfillment of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount," in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church* 248–63.

²⁵ E.g. L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (8 vols.; Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948) 3.23–24; 4.205–25; 5.97–114; Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible* 999–1000 (n. 2 on Matt 5:2). Walvoord (*Matthew* 43–46) speaks of the Sermon as presenting "kingdom truth," "not church truth precisely," and contrasts it with John 13–17 which he believes deals "specifically with the spiritual character of the present age." Kent ("Matthew" 936) stated that the Sermon "is not primarily a statement of principles for the Christian Church (which was yet unrevealed)." Martin ("Dispensational Approaches" 40–43) presents several problems with this view.

²⁶ Martin, "Dispensational Approaches" 43–44.

²⁷ J. D. Pentecost's approach seems to combine several views. In *Thy Kingdom Come* 203–4, he speaks of the offer and rejection of the covenanted Davidic kingdom. Yet on pages 205–6 he describes the Sermon as pointing out that the righteousness of the religious leaders did not match up to God's required righteousness. This approximates the penitential or Lutheran view of the Sermon. To complicate matters, Saucy (*Case* 18) cites an essay by Pentecost which seems to support the interim ethic view: "The Purpose of the Sermon on the Mount," *BSac* 115 (1958): 317. To complicate matters even further, Pentecost also published a book which presents the Sermon as applicable for the Christian life. See *Design for Living: The Sermon on the Mount* (Chicago: Moody, 1975). It is not surprising that Martin ("Christ the Fulfillment" 251) described Pentecost's approach to the Sermon as somewhat confused and disjointed.

²⁸ Martin, "Dispensational Approaches" 45–46; and idem, "Christ, the Fulfillment" 253–54; Toussaint, *Behold the King* 91–94. This approach has affinities with the *konsequente Eschatologie* of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, whose view of Jesus as an apocalyptic preacher opposed the "liberal" approach to Jesus as a moral teacher of a spiritual kingdom which was current in Germany in the late nineteenth century.

Contrary to all these views, the Sermon presents the gist of Jesus' ethical teaching, the way of life for those who have turned their lives over to him.²⁹ The Sermon fleshes out what it means to repent in view of the nearness of the Kingdom. The Sermon has this gracious purpose during the days of the historical Jesus, during the days of Matthew's literary activity, and during all the days of the church until the end of the age. The bulk of the Sermon is bracketed by an *inclusio* which focuses on the Law and the Prophets, setting the context of Jesus' own teachings (5:17; 7:12). The beatitudes as eschatological blessings present the core values of a disciple whose present experience of the kingdom (5:3, 10) is supported by the promises of its future fullness (5:4–9).³⁰ Jesus announces that his mission is not to destroy but to fulfill the Torah and the Prophets (5:17–21), making it clear that continuity rather than discontinuity is the basic model for Matthean biblical theology. In the model prayer Jesus prioritizes the arrival of the kingdom in the same breath as the enhancement of God's reputation and the performance of his will (6:9–10), making it clear that his rule is present as well as future.

If the above understanding is correct, dispensationalists who view the Sermon as law for the future kingdom which is only indirectly relevant to Christians today³¹ make a serious mistake. Jesus' teaching in the Sermon historically was intended primarily for his immediate audience of disciples,

²⁹ Martin ("Christ, the Fulfillment" 254) judges that his view is predominant in the circles in which he ministers. He discusses the view in some detail, first explaining the relationship of the biblical prophets, including Jesus, to the law (pp. 254–59), and then summarizing the view (pp. 259–61). Judging from his brief remarks on this matter, it would appear that Barbieri ("Matthew" 2.28) would agree with the believers' ethic position. Even DeWitt (*Dispensational Theology* 60) seems to take this view of the Sermon rather than the Kingdom view.

³⁰ See Turner, *Matthew* 143–44. H. A. Sturz argued similarly in "The Sermon on the Mount and its Application to the Present Age," *Grace Journal* 4 (1963) 3–15. See also G. L. Lawlor, *The Beatitudes are for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974); D. Turner, "Whom Does God Approve? The Context, Structure, Purpose, and Exegesis of Matthew's Beatitudes," *CTR* 6 (1992) 29–42.

³¹ According to Scofield, the Sermon on the Mount is "pure law," providing the divine constitution for the future kingdom, yet it has "a beautiful moral application to the Christian" (*The Scofield Reference Bible* 999–1000 n. 2 on Matt 5:2). Gaebelain (*Matthew* 1.109–11) views the Sermon's applicability to be the same as the Old Testament. L. S. Chafer attempts the same argument in *Systematic Theology* 4.177–78; 5.344–45. W. H. Griffith Thomas's approach is quite similar (*Outline Studies* 67–68). Even the *New Scofield Reference Bible* (ed. E. S. English et al.; New York: Oxford, 1967) 997 (n. 4 on Matt 5:3) regards the Sermon as law which is no more or less applicable to the Christian than the Mosaic law. See also Baker, *Dispensational Theology* 323; Walvoord, *Matthew* 44–46. This approach to the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ appears to damn it with faint praise. Scofield further says of Matt 6:12 (1002 n. 1), "This is legal ground" and contrasts it with Eph 4:32, "which is grace." This blunt bifurcation is moderated somewhat by both the *New Scofield Reference Bible* 1000–1001 n. 4; and by *The Ryrie Study Bible* (ed. C. C. Ryrie; Chicago: Moody, 1976) 1348. Yet both of these attempt to distinguish between two types of forgiveness, implying that one's lack of a forgiveness merely hinders fellowship with God and does not indicate the unforgiving person's unconverted state, as Matthew teaches here and in 18:21–35. This sort of implicit antinomianism, which is due to a misunderstanding of "law and grace," becomes fodder for reformed critics of dispensationalism. See, e.g., John Gerstner's polemics in *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991) 209–59, along with the response by D. Turner, "'Dubious Evangelicalism'? A Response to John Gerstner's Critique of Dispensationalism," *GTJ* 12 (1992) 263–77.

although the crowd of uncommitted onlookers also heard it (Matt 5:1–2). When Matthew narrated the Sermon for his own post-Easter audience, he did so with their spiritual needs in mind. At both of these levels, both that of the historical Jesus and that of Matthew's literary activity, the Sermon is primarily in view when Jesus commissioned the disciples to teach the nations to do all he had taught (Matt 28:19–20). Additionally, at key points the teaching of Paul echoes that of the Sermon,³² a fact that ought to give pause to those who wish to bifurcate the Sermon as law from the teaching of Paul as grace.

III. THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM (MATTHEW 13)

The parables of Matthew 13 should be construed as presenting and explaining the varying responses to the Kingdom message, past, present, and future. At the historical level, these parables enabled the disciples to understand and interpret (13:51) the mixed responses to Jesus' and their own ministries. At the literary level, these parables were intended by Matthew to aid his own audience similarly. Their function today, and until the end of the age, remains the same.³³ The "mysteries" of the kingdom (13:11) refer to new revelation about the kingdom whose message (13:19) has been preached since the days of John, not a new message about a "mystery kingdom" which is equated, more or less, with Christendom.³⁴ Granted, these parables may constitute a new *method* of teaching,³⁵ but this does not mean that they portray a radically new *form* of the kingdom.³⁶ Rather, the parables

³² E.g. Rom 12:14 with Matt 5:44; Rom 12:17–21 with Matt 5:38–42; Gal 5:14 and Rom 13:8–11 with Matt 5:17, 7:12, 22:34–40; Phil 2:15 with Matt 5:14; Eph 4:32–5:1 with Matt 6:12, 14–15; 18:35.

³³ See further Turner, *Matthew* 332–55; Ladd, *Presence* 218–42. Recent discontinuity dispensational studies of Matthew 13 include M. D. Stallard, "Hermeneutics and Matthew 13," 2 parts, *Conservative Theological Journal* 5 (2001). This publication is difficult to access (evidently it is now called the *Journal of Dispensational Theology*). Stallard presents a consistently futuristic view similar to that of Toussaint. The work of G. W. Derickson also appears to defend Toussaint's approach: "Matthew's Literary Structure and its Dispensational Implications," *BSac* 163 (2006) 423–37. Yet it is doubtful whether literary structure *per se* has theological implications of any sort. Be that as it may, the content of this study is *vice versa* its title. See also the extensive eight-part study of Matthew 13 by M. L. Bailey in *BSac* for 1998–99, which tends to moderate some of the differences between discontinuity and progressive dispensationalists.

³⁴ See, e.g., *Scofield Reference Bible* 1014 (n. 1 on Matt 13:3); *New Scofield Reference Bible* 1013 (n. 3 on Matt 13:3); Gaebelien, *Matthew* 1.259–67; Kelly, *Matthew* 262–66; Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* 218–25, 234–35; Walvoord, *Matthew* 95–97. The focus on Israel's rejection and a new form of the kingdom is much less pronounced in Griffith Thomas (*Matthew* 184–85).

³⁵ This is debatable, since John (3:10, 12) and Jesus (5:13–16; 6:26–30; 7:13–20, 24–27; 8:20; 9:12, 15–17; 10:16, 29–31; 11:16–19; 12:29, 33, 43–45) have previously used metaphorical language to teach the disciples. In three places, Jesus uses a typical parabolic introductory formula utilizing ὁμοίω (7:24, 26; 11:16). But the significant word παραβολή occurs first here (13:3, 10, 13, 18, 24, 31, 33, 34, 35, 36, 53) in a context where the kingdom is explicitly compared to earthly realities through an introductory formula (13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52), and where there is an explicit distinction between those who are on the outside who do not understand (13:13–15, 34–35) and those on the inside who receive explanations and who are expected to understand (13:16–23, 36–43, 49–52).

³⁶ See further Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 251–54; Saucy, *Case* 164.

describe the stage of the present kingdom which precedes its full apocalyptic establishment.³⁷

Toussaint's approach is unusual among discontinuity dispensationalists. He states that the same kingdom is in view in Matthew 13 as the one which was proclaimed as being at hand in Matt 3:2; 4:17; and 10:7. He does not agree with many discontinuity dispensationalists that Matthew 13 presents the kingdom in mystery form, but affirms that the mysteries of Matthew 13 reveal new truths about the postponement of the future millennium.³⁸ It would seem then that in Toussaint's view one would read Matt 13:24 in this fashion: "the *absence* of the kingdom is like . . .," since what is described is the *postponement* of the kingdom rather than its *presence*.

M. L. Bailey presents a uniquely detailed view of the relationship of the kingdom in Matthew 13 to previous and future aspects of the kingdom. Bailey discerns three stages of the kingdom in Matthew 13: (1) its OT revelation and development; (2) its interadvent age growth and development; and (3) its future earthly manifestation. The present phase itself also has three stages: (1) its beginning with Jesus; (2) its expansion through the church; and (3) its culminating judgment.³⁹ Overall, it is helpful that Bailey sees considerable continuity between all these phases of the kingdom. Yet it may be doubted whether the aorist tenses in 13:24–28 refer to OT events.⁴⁰ Another matter which could be clarified is the exegetical basis of the posited relationship of the interadvent "mystery" kingdom to that announced by Jesus. This evidently was determined more by the typical discontinuity dispensationalist view of Matthew 12 than by anything in Matthew 13 itself.

As discontinuity dispensationalists have often pointed out, it is clear that the parables of Matthew 13 occur at a crucial juncture, one where Galilean opposition to Jesus has come to a head in the horrific scene which results in Jesus' warning about the unpardonable sin (12:22–32). Yet the common discontinuity dispensational interpretation that these parables portray the decisive break⁴¹ with national Israel and present a new form of the kingdom as Christendom is unwarranted. The unnamed Galilean scribes and Pharisees who slandered Jesus were hardly in a position to speak *ex cathedra* for the nation. If a decisive break with Israel had occurred, one would not expect Jesus to continue to manifest the presence of the kingdom through miracles on his way to Jerusalem (Matt 12:28; 14:13–35; 15:29–39; 17:14–20; 19:1–2; 20:29–34) and then in the holy Temple itself (21:14). Nor would Jesus have engaged the religious leaders in prose (not merely parabolic) debate on the journey to Jerusalem (15:1–20; 16:1–4; 17:24–27; 19:3–9) and during the final week in Jerusalem (21:12–16; 21:23–23:39). It is only this running debate

³⁷ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 251.

³⁸ Toussaint, *Behold the King* 171–76.

³⁹ M. L. Bailey, "The Doctrine of the Kingdom in Matthew 13," *BSac* 156 (1999) 445–46. The present age of growth and development is the "mystery" form of the kingdom.

⁴⁰ Bailey, "Doctrine" 145. As would be expected, aorist verb forms are abundant in the parables in Matthew 13.

⁴¹ Bailey's term is "a great turning point." See "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," *BSac* 155 (1998) 172.

with the Jerusalem establishment, culminating in the woes of Matt 23:13–36, Jesus' departure from the Temple (24:1), and the tearing of the Temple veil at Jesus' death (27:51), that approximates anything that might be called Israel's national rejection.

It has been argued that Jesus' use of Isa 6:8–10 in Matt 13:13–15 indicates God's rejection of Israel.⁴² However, if this text originally in Isaiah's day had spoken of national rejection of the Jews, there would have been no need for Jesus to cite it. Indeed, there would have been no Israel to whom Jesus would preach. Neither did Jesus' use of Isaiah 6 in his day augur the national rejection of Israel. If it had, Paul would not have preached to the Jews first and used Isaiah 6 in speaking to the Jewish contingent in Rome, warning them of the consequences of unbelief. Paul did not believe in Israel's rejection since he spoke of Gentiles who would "also," in addition to Jews evidently, listen to his message (αὐτοὶ καὶ ἀκούσονται; Acts 28:28). In other words, if Isa 6:8–10 had spoken with finality of divine rejection, the repeated use of the text in later situations similar to Isaiah's would have been mistaken. Also, the term *national* rejection leaves no room for the "good soil" (13:8, 23), the fruitful Jews who in following Jesus became the nucleus of the church.

In short, if Israel *as a nation* had already rejected Jesus and in turn been rejected by him in Matthew 12, the *denouement* of Matthew's narrative would be rendered anticlimactic and the passion of Jesus in Jerusalem would be something of an afterthought.⁴³ The climactic events of Matthew, and of course of the fourfold canonical gospel tradition, are those which occurred in Jerusalem, not in Galilee. But there is no *national* rejection of Israel in Matthew.⁴⁴ Granted, the great majority of the Jerusalem leaders and of Jesus' contemporaries did not believe in him. But discontinuity dispensationalism's view of national rejection⁴⁵ does not reckon with those Jews who did believe. They form an entity which is simultaneously the Jewish remnant and the nucleus of the nascent church. This entity extends the kingdom to the Gentiles until the time of the end when the Twelve rule over the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28). It may well be said that the great majority of Israel rejected Jesus and the kingdom he announced, but God in grace did not reject Israel, even temporarily.⁴⁶

IV. THE KINGDOM AND THE CHURCH IN MATTHEW 16:18–19

Many discontinuity dispensationalists are aware that Matthew is the only Gospel to mention the church, yet the implications of this fact are typically

⁴² E.g. Kelly, *Matthew 270*; Toussaint, *Behold the King* 170.

⁴³ Discontinuity dispensationalists do not *intend* to minimize in any way the passion of Jesus. However, when their typical interpretation of Matthew 13 plays out, there are consequences.

⁴⁴ And there is no national rejection of Israel in Rom 11:16–27 and Eph 2:11–22.

⁴⁵ Bailey says that in response to "the Jews" rejecting Jesus, "Jesus presented the parables to show them that they were no longer the privileged people to whom God would impart his revelation." See "The Parable of the Sower" 172. Many other blunt statements like this may be found in discontinuity dispensational literature.

⁴⁶ This issue is taken up again in the ensuing discussion of Matt 21:43.

minimized by such scholars. Perhaps the emphasis on Matthew as a Jewish gospel is at the root of this problem, especially when for such scholars the term “Jewish” connotes an emphasis on “law” and “kingdom” as distinct from “grace” and “church.” Yet Matt 16:18–19 closely associates the kingdom and the church, with the apostles as foundational gatekeepers.⁴⁷ Peter as the *primus inter pares* apostle is given foundational⁴⁸ authority over entrance⁴⁹ into God’s saving reign, not into Christendom or the millennium.⁵⁰ The reluctance of dispensational scholars to give Peter his due as the rock of the church may be due not only to their concern about the Roman Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession but also, at least in some cases, to their desire to aggrandize Paul.⁵¹ No doubt Paul was “the apostle of the Gentiles” (Rom 11:13; cf. Gal 2:7–10; 1 Tim 2:7), but Peter was prominent on the day of Pentecost and later on what may be appropriately called the Gentile Pentecost at the household of Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10).⁵²

A more important issue in the dispensational exegesis of Matt 16:18–19 is the relationship between the church built on the rock and the keys of the kingdom given to Peter. One frequently finds among earlier dispensationalists grave concerns about the “social gospel” equation of the kingdom with the church. In this view the kingdom was an ethical society founded on the teaching of Jesus. Dispensationalists could not abide an emphasis on Jesus as an ethical teacher if this in any way diminished the redemptive centrality of the cross.⁵³ Their zeal for the cross, and for the Pauline teachings which

⁴⁷ An additional dispensational wrinkle is that so-called “ultradispensationalists” take the church of Matt 16:19 as an evidently temporary Jewish church which was superseded by the ministry of Paul and the unique revelation given to him. See Baker, *Dispensational Theology* 471. DeWitt presents a more nuanced version of this view in *Dispensational Theology* 241–47. He says that “the *ekklesia* of Matthew 16:18, then, is not the coming church of Christ’s joint body, but the eschatological remnant of Israel, the latter day national assembly” (p. 242). But this Jewish “eschatological remnant” is the nucleus which becomes the entity described in the revelations given through Paul. This continuity is described by Paul metaphorically (Rom 11:16–24) and propositionally (Eph 2:11–22).

⁴⁸ For arguments that Peter as the representative apostle is the rock of the church, see Turner, *Matthew* 406–7; and idem, “*Primus inter Pares?* Peter among the Apostles in the Gospel of Matthew,” in *New Testament Studies in Honor of Homer A. Kent* (ed. G. Meadors; Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1991) 179–201. Dispensational scholars are generally squeamish about this view, preferring to think that Jesus himself (Barbieri, “Matthew” 2.57; Gaebelein, *Matthew* 2.49–50; Griffith Thomas, *Matthew* 247–48; Walvoord, *Matthew* 123) or Peter’s confession (Kelly, *Matthew* 329–31; Kent, “Matthew” 959; Toussaint, *Behold the King* 202) is the foundation of the church. McClain (*Greatness* 328) is an exception to this tendency.

⁴⁹ The keys most likely signify authority over entrance into the church. See Turner, *Matthew* 407–8. McClain (*Greatness* 329) and Toussaint (*Behold the King* 205–7) hold that Peter’s use of the keys would be fulfilled only in the future when the saints rule the earth during the millennium.

⁵⁰ McClain (*Greatness* 329–30) took the keys as indicating apostolic authority to rule the future millennium. He believed that any notion of the church using the keys in the present age mistakenly arrogates regal authority and divine prerogatives to sinful humans. In his view, the root cause of the error is the identification of the kingdom with the church.

⁵¹ This motive is clear in Gaebelein, *Matthew* 2.49.

⁵² This acknowledged by Kelly, *Matthew* 335.

⁵³ E.g. Gaebelein, *Matthew*, 1.5; 2.106–8.

developed the implications of the cross most fully, is commendable and exemplary. However, their comparative neglect of the teachings of Jesus is neither commendable nor exemplary. The question of balance again comes into play. According to the NT, Jesus is complementarily both a regal teacher and a redeeming savior; these concepts are not mutually exclusive.

Ladd's approach to the church as the human agency which furthers the reign of God is useful in explaining this passage.⁵⁴ Apart from the dynamic power of the king, the church could not be built. Yet the king chose a human foundation for his church and equipped Peter and the apostles with authority over entrance to the kingdom. Apart from this authority (cf. Matt 10:7; 28:18), the church would have no resources for its daunting task. Invested with this authority, it has a powerful message which will eventually overcome all its enemies.⁵⁵ The tendency of discontinuity dispensationalists to bifurcate the kingdom and the church may lead unintentionally to a weakening of the church's message.

V. THE TAKING AND GIVING OF THE KINGDOM IN MATTHEW 21:43

Perhaps the dominant exegesis of Matt 21:43 has been the Gentile church's usurping Israel's historic role in mediating God's rule.⁵⁶ Scofield himself commented on this text that "the kingdom of God and its righteousness is taken from Israel nationally and given to the Gentiles."⁵⁷ Many dispensational exegetes also hold to a replacement theology of sorts in which Israel is temporarily replaced by the church during the hiatus age of grace, only to be reinstated to prominence after the rapture for a role during the tribulation and millennium.⁵⁸ Other dispensationalists understand Matt 21:43 to refer to God taking the kingdom from Jesus' contemporaries and then, after the church age hiatus concludes, giving it to the generation of Jews who repent

⁵⁴ Ladd, *Presence* 262–77. Ladd's view ought to allay the fears of many discontinuity dispensationalists that the church will be identified with the kingdom. Ladd explicitly denied that was the case and argued instead that the church as a human custodial instrument witnesses to the divine rule which created it.

⁵⁵ Along these lines see R. L. Saucy, "The Presence of the Kingdom and the Life of the Church," *BSac* 145 (1988) 30–46.

⁵⁶ For C. F. Baker the kingdom is taken from Israel and given to the "church" of Jesus' Jewish disciples, which is not to be confused with today's church which was revealed to and began with Paul. See *Dispensational Theology* 471.

⁵⁷ *Scofield Reference Bible* 1029 (n. 1 on Matt 21:43). Scofield dubiously viewed the "kingdom of God" as a "larger word" (!) which describes the universal kingdom as opposed to the "kingdom of heaven," which describes the mediatorial kingdom. See the notes on 3:2 (996) and 6:33 (1003). *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (1029 n. 2) maintains Scofield's kingdom of heaven vs. kingdom of God distinction but presents a non-ethnic understanding of the fruit bearing "nation" to whom the kingdom is given.

⁵⁸ Ryrie's note on Matt 21:43 simply says, "taken from the Jews and given to the church (1 Pet 2:9)." See the *Ryrie Study Bible* 1378. Some scholars speak of the church as recipient, others of the Gentiles. See also Barbieri ("Matthew" 2.70–71) and Kent ("Matthew" 967).

during the great tribulation.⁵⁹ Both of these interpretations fail when it is noticed that the religious leaders Jesus speaks to here answer to the tenant farmers in the parable (21:41), and Israel to the vineyard whose fruit has not been rendered to the landowner (21:41). Therefore the kingdom is not taken from Israel *per se* but from its leaders,⁶⁰ whose failures have been prominently featured in Matthew's narrative. And the kingdom is not given to the Gentile church but to Jesus' Jewish disciples, who form the nucleus of the messianic remnant which becomes the nascent church. Matthew 21:43 does not teach even a temporary replacement of the Jews by the Gentiles. Rather it speaks of new leaders for Israel, beginning with the Twelve (Matt 19:28).⁶¹ Through these Jewish followers of Jesus, the gospel will be taken to all the nations.

It is rather striking that discontinuity dispensationalists do not hesitate to use the language of rejection and replacement when speaking of this text.⁶² They are evidently led to do so primarily by their separation of Israel and the church and perhaps secondarily by their understanding of the kingdom. Israel's kingdom destiny is a matter of prophecy, but the church is an unforeseen mystery, and so the two cannot actively coexist as parallel *loci* of God's redemptive work. But this understanding is debatable at at least two levels. At the level of narrative exegesis, the Matthean parable arguably speaks of new leaders for Israel, not of a future entity, the church, replacing Israel. At the level of biblical theology, discontinuity dispensationalism's "two peoples of God" understanding has remarkable affinity with covenant theology's "church as new people of God" understanding. Both posit the church as a replacement for Israel. On the other hand, progressive dispensationalism's "church extends Israel" understanding posits a continuity in redemptive history which is in keeping with Jeremiah's and Paul's emphatic denials of the notion that God could reject Israel (Jer 31:35–37; Rom 11:1).⁶³

⁵⁹ McClain argues this at some length in *Greatness* 295–98. See also Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* 226.

⁶⁰ McClain (*Greatness* 296) agrees but goes on to assert that the leaders represent the nation from which the kingdom is taken. But for Matthew judgment comes upon the leaders, and the rest of the nation bears the consequences of the leaders' sins. This is not to say that the nation at large is innocent, but that Matthew's focus is on the bad shepherds, not the sheep, as in Matt 9:36. The NT does speak of the judgment coming on Israel, but this judgment is temporary and partial (Rom 9:1–13; 11:1–5, 11, 25). It is also disciplinary, serving to renew the covenantal relationship, not sever it (2 Sam 7:14–15; Heb 12:7–8). Speaking of God's "national rejection" of Israel fails to account for these biblical nuances.

⁶¹ Turner, *Matthew* 517–18, and more extensively in "Matthew 21:43 and the Future of Israel," *BSac* 159/633 (2002) 46–61. See also the similar view of Blaising and Bock in *Progressive Dispensationalism* 237–38.

⁶² Another example is D. Lowery, who describes Israel not only as rejected and replaced but even as reprobate. Lowery moderates matters somewhat by affirming that this reprobate state is not irreversible or irredeemable. See "Evidence from Matthew" 165, 171–72.

⁶³ Lowery ("Evidence" 171) cites Rom 11:15 as evidence that Paul as well as Matthew can view Israel as "a rejected people." But Rom 11:15 comes on the heels of Paul's emphatic denial of Israel's rejection in Rom 11:1–2. Like Rom 11:12, 11:15 contrasts Israel's present state of "failure" and "rejection" with its future "fullness" and "acceptance" as part of an *a minori ad maius* argument which demonstrates God's wise plan of Gentile salvation. The following imagery of the olive

VI. THE KINGDOM IN THE ESCHATOLOGICAL DISCOURSE
(MATTHEW 24–25)

Dispensational exegetes have tended to favor a strictly futuristic exegesis of Matthew 24–25 which has Jesus ignore the first part of the disciples' question regarding the destruction of the Temple ("when will these things be," 24:3)⁶⁴ and focus on yet future matters related to the end of the age.⁶⁵ Even 24:4–14, which repeatedly discourages a futuristic exegesis (24:6, 8, 13), is commonly viewed as portraying events which will occur after the rapture.⁶⁶ Some take this so far as to affirm that Matt 24:14 describes preaching during the future tribulation of the coming earthly kingdom, a message which will not focus on the finished redemptive work of Jesus.⁶⁷

Strictly futuristic exegesis founders when it becomes preoccupied with detailed predictive subtleties at the expense of clear prophetic admonitions. Futurism has problems with the generation which will not pass away until everything is fulfilled (24:34).⁶⁸ It addresses such abstruse questions as

tree does not speak of a rejection of Israel *as a people* but of rejected *individuals* ("some of the branches," 11:17) who are replaced by individual Gentiles. The olive tree remains the place of blessing, and individual Jews who believe in Jesus (cf. 11:2–5) remain as branches in that tree, accompanied by their Gentile fellows. The Gentiles as unnatural grafted branches are supported by the root, not *vice versa* (11:18), so they should not conceitedly speak against the natural branches of the tree (11:19–21). In light of the overall argument and imagery of the passage, it seems unlikely that Paul would agree to any notion of Israel being a rejected people.

⁶⁴ Scofield (*Reference Bible* 1032–33 (n. 2 on Matt 24:3) believed that the first question is answered only in Luke. *The New Scofield Reference Bible* 1033 (n. 4 on Matt 24:3) essentially repeats its predecessor's words. Similarly Walvoord (*Matthew* 182) says that "Matthew's Gospel does not answer the first question . . . this is given in more detail in Luke)." Barbieri ("Matthew" 2.76) follows this line of reasoning: "Matthew did not record Jesus' answer to the first question, but Luke did (Luke 22:20)." He goes on to say "the Church is not present in any sense in chapters 24 and 25." Blaising and Bock (*Progressive Dispensationalism* 239) surprisingly take the question "when will these things be" not in terms of the historic destruction of the Temple in AD 70 but as a reference to "the destructive judgments that would signal his coming and the coming of the kingdom." They generally present a futuristic understanding of Matthew 24–25. See also S. D. Toussaint, "A Critique of the Preterist View of the Olivet Discourse," *BSac* 161 (2004) 469–90.

⁶⁵ Kent, "Matthew" 971–72.

⁶⁶ Pentecost's strictly futuristic analysis (*Thy Kingdom Come* 249–55) is extremely precise. He sees 24:4–8 as the first half of the tribulation, 24:9–14 as the second half, 24:15–26 as repetition and explanation, leading up to Christ's second advent in 24:27–30. McClain's futurism (*Greatness* 362–66) is much more nuanced because he is aware that two main events are under consideration (the destruction of the Temple and the return of Christ), that there are warnings against premature identifications of signs with the end of the age (Matt 24:8), that Luke's account diverges from Matthew and Mark, and that the genre of biblical prophecy precludes a precise chronological scheme. Most significant for the preterist-futurist approach espoused here is McClain's understanding of the AD 70 destruction of the Temple as a shadow of the end (p. 364).

⁶⁷ Baker, *Dispensational Theology* 331.

⁶⁸ Implausible futurist views of ἡ γενεὰ αὐτῆ in 24:34 include the Jewish people (*Ryrie Study Bible* 1385 (n. on Matt 24:34) or the generation alive at the coming of Jesus (Toussaint, *Behold the King* 279–80; Walvoord, *Matthew*, 192–93). H. Lindsey's discredited view of this text had the generation alive at the establishment of the modern nation of Israel in 1948 experience the appearing of Christ. See *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 53–54. A more likely understanding is that Jesus assures his contemporaries that they will still be alive when the signs occur. See Griffith Thomas, *Matthew* 350–51; Turner, *Matthew* 585–86.

whether Matt 24:40–41 refers to the pretribulational rapture or the subsequent coming of Christ to the earth.⁶⁹ A more plausible exegesis of the eschatological discourse has Jesus speak directly to the first part of the disciples' question about the Temple's destruction and then in light of that near event to the distant end of the age which will occur after the gospel has reached the ends of the earth (24:14). Such a "preterist-futurist" exegesis⁷⁰ is in keeping with the ethical element of biblical prophecy and avoids the tendency to utilize Matthew 24–25 in support of "dispensational" date-setting schemes which are eventually proven to be erroneous.⁷¹ Jesus' prophetic teaching contains not only promises about the future (24:1–31), but more importantly ethical admonition about how to live in light of that future (24:32–25:46). The church, not a future Jewish remnant, is addressed by Jesus' parabolic exhortations to be watchful (24:32–25:13), faithful (25:14–30), and merciful (25:31–46). Such ethical admonitions are part and parcel of NT *paraenesis*.

VII. JESUS' COMMISSION IN MATTHEW 28:18–20

Dispensational exegesis of Matt 28:18–20 has been diverse and ambiguous.⁷² Although many have taken this global mission mandate as the marching orders for the church,⁷³ a considerable number have understood it differently. Darby did not believe that Matthew 28 described the Christian

⁶⁹ J. F. Walvoord, "Is a Posttribulational Rapture Revealed in Matthew 24?" *GTJ* 6 (1985): 257–66. Barbieri ("Matthew" 2.79) and Kelly (Matthew 454), along with most discontinuity dispensationalists, take the latter view, which is consistent with their belief that the church is not found in any sense in Matthew 24–25. The problem here is that ironically, debate over the precise chronology of this text can distract followers of Jesus from the alertness he enjoins.

⁷⁰ D. Turner, "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1–41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments," *GTJ* 10 (1989) 3–27. Saucy does not directly address this question, but passing comments (*Case* 97, 101–2, 130, 261, 289) seem to indicate his general agreement with this view. Both the *Scofield Reference Bible* 1032–33 (n. 2 on Matt 24:3) and *The New Scofield Reference Bible* 1033 (n. 4 on Matt 24:3) describe Matt 24:4–14 as having a "double interpretation" which encompasses both the general character of the interadvent age as a whole and the intensification of its turmoil at the end of that age. *NSRB* goes on to view Matt 24:15–28 as a description of the great tribulation. The *SRB* and *NSRB*'s approach to 24:4–14 is similar to my approach to 24:15–28.

⁷¹ Most futurists denounce date-setting. However, when one removes the church entirely from the eschatological discourse, date-setting can arise as a substitute for paraenesis in a mistaken attempt to establish relevance. Undue preoccupation with the chronological sequence of Matt 24:4–31 does not necessarily lead to a loss of alertness, but it is this very thing which Jesus warns against in Matt 24:45–25:13. Whether one overestimates (as did the evil slave) or underestimates (as did the foolish bridesmaids) the delay in the master's return, the result is a loss of alertness.

⁷² Much of this section depends on the work of R. T. Clutter, "Teaching Whom to Obey What? Select Dispensational Interpretations of the Command in Matthew 28:18–20" (paper read at ETS annual meeting, San Diego CA, November 14, 2007). Clutter surveys the history of key dispensationalists' diverse interpretations of this text.

⁷³ Scofield's teaching that the death and resurrection of Jesus began the dispensation of grace would seem to imply that Christians are responsible for Matt 28:18–20. See the *Scofield Reference Bible* 1044 (n. 1 on Matt 28:19). Griffith Thomas (*Matthew* 467–68) expressly broadens the commission from the Eleven to the entire church. H. A. Ironside's rather sarcastic exasperation with those who thought otherwise may be found in *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (New York: Loizeaux, 1930) 17–18, 26.

mission.⁷⁴ Those like him who take such a view limit the scope of Matthew 28 to the Twelve and perhaps also a future Jewish remnant during the tribulation period.⁷⁵ Chafer evidently did not view Matt 28:18–20 as valuable for the church's mission. He cited the text primarily as a proof for the Trinity,⁷⁶ and believed that the NT contained only individual challenges, not corporate commissions for the church *per se*.⁷⁷

Other dispensational commentaries take Matt 28:18–20 as the church's marching orders, but are concerned that the command to teach the Gentiles to obey all that Jesus taught not be construed as putting Gentiles under the law.⁷⁸ Some dispensationalists diminish the ethical content of the commission by claiming that it does not require the church to teach disciples from all the nations to obey *all* that Jesus taught.⁷⁹ One wonders whether this

⁷⁴ J. N. Darby said of Matthew 28, "It is not the christian [*sic*] mission properly so called; this is found rather in John xx., Luke xxiv., and Mark xvi." See his *Notes on the Gospel of Matthew* (London: Morrish, n.d.) 166–67. Darby evidently believed that the Twelve did not accomplish this mission to the Gentiles and that it was transferred to Paul. See also "The Closing Commissions in the Gospels," in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, 32 vols. (ed. W. Kelly; repr. London: Stow Hill, 1966) 32.376. Why Darby preferred the other gospel commissions to Matthew's is not clear. C. F. Baker denies that the gospel commissions or even the one of Acts 1:8 are for today since the revelation of the mystery to Paul had not yet been given. All these commissions relate to past and future preaching of the earthly messianic kingdom, not the gospel of grace for the present age which was revealed to Paul alone. See *Dispensational Theology* 558–63.

⁷⁵ Gaebelein, *Matthew* 2.622. See also J. M. Gray, *Christian Workers' Commentary* (New York: Revell, 1915) 313; and W. L. Pettingill, *Bible Questions Answered* (Wheaton: Van Kampen, n.d.) 100, 106–7; and *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Simple Studies in Matthew* (Findlay: Fundamental Truth, n.d.) 321–22. These views closely resemble those of E. W. Bullinger, who is regarded as an ultra-dispensationalist. Bullinger took Matt 28:18 futuristically and connected Matt 28:19–20 to the future tribulation preaching of the kingdom gospel in Matt 24:14. This kingdom gospel was not to be confused with the Pauline gospel of grace. See *How to Enjoy the Bible* (Reprinted, New York: Cosimo, 2007) 131–33. Bullinger's views are updated by C. F. Baker, *Bible Truth* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Bible College, 1956) 118–21 and by C. R. Stam, *Things That Differ* (Chicago: Berean Bible Society, 1951) 169–90.

⁷⁶ Chafer, *Systematic Theology* 1.303–4.

⁷⁷ Chafer, *Systematic Theology* 4.149. Chafer cites Scofield in support of this viewpoint. Chafer devotes nine pages to the organized church (4.144–53) in his eight volumes of systematic theology. See the critique of dispensationalism's undeveloped ecclesiology by M. D. Williams, "Where's the Church? The Church as the Unfinished Business of Dispensational Theology," *GTJ* 10 (1989): 165–82.

⁷⁸ Kelly, *Matthew* 519. Kelly correctly connected Matt 28:20a with the Sermon on the Mount, but used strong words to deny any implication of "Judaizing," for lack of a better term: "It was not a question of putting the Gentiles under the law, which has been the ruin of Christendom, the denial of Christianity, and the deep dishonor of Christ Himself." It would seem that Kelly read Matthew 28 through the lens of Galatians.

⁷⁹ Barbieri's comments ("Matthew" 2.94) are puzzling: "Those who respond are also to be taught the truths Jesus had specifically taught the Eleven. Not all that Jesus taught the disciples was communicated by them but they did teach specific truths for the new Church Age as they went abroad." Walvoord (*Matthew* 243–44) is similarly reluctant to oblige the church to teach the nations to obey all that Jesus taught. He questionably bifurcates Jesus' teachings between those which are related to law and kingdom and those which are related to the church, such as John 13–17. In a personal conversation, R. T. Clutter pointed out that Walvoord's views are likely based on Chafer, who, due to his debatable law vs. grace rubric (see, e.g., *Systematic Theology* 4.180–81, 203–33, 243–46), privileges John 13–17 over other teachings of Jesus as instructions for Christians

mediating position is any more convincing than the view which completely removes Matt 28:18–20 from the church's duties.

A better understanding of the commission takes it as making explicit what Matthew has been implying all along throughout his gospel—Jesus' Jewish disciples must take the message of God's reign to all the nations. This message centers in Jesus as fulfiller of Torah and Nebiim, and is best understood as the extension of God's reign throughout the world through obedient disciples in the global church. It is therefore appropriate that the commission is couched in language which unmistakably alludes to the commissioning of Moses and the prophets (28:20 with Deut 18:18; Josh 1:7, and other similar texts) as well as the reign of Daniel's Son of Man (28:18 with Dan 7:13–14).⁸⁰ In this intertextual light, there is no room for a fundamental discontinuity between law and grace, Israel and church, prophecy and mystery.⁸¹ Rather, the commission envisions the church, energized by the powerful presence of Jesus, as the agency which extends God's saving rule throughout the world by its inculcation of Jesus' teaching, which fulfills the Law and the Prophets. The commission envisions nothing less than Torah for the Gentiles, but it is the Torah as fulfilled by Jesus, its ultimate teacher (Matt 5:17–48).

VIII. CONCLUSION

A progressive dispensational approach to Matthew differs from many previous dispensational approaches by taking Matthew seriously as *Christian* Scripture for the *church*, whatever its Jewish setting. Matthew's Jewish setting must not be taken to imply that the first Gospel is primarily an apologetic to (unbelieving) Jews, one which purports to show that God has abandoned Israel, even if only temporarily, and has begun a new program, one without roots in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, Matthew portrays the church as a Jewish community whose mission is to summon all the nations to obey Jesus, the ultimate Torah teacher who fulfills Moses and the prophets. Matthew's Jewish church is distinct from Israel only because of its messianic faith, and the church today is redemptively continuous with these Jewish roots.

In terms of the seven *cruces* announced at the outset of this study,

today (*Systematic Theology* 5.140–66). Chafer went so far as to say that the difference between these teachings is so great that “they would hardly be attributed to the same speaker,” and that “there is no bond of truth whatsoever between the two discourses already considered [Matthew 5–7 and 24–25] and the Upper Room Discourse” (5.141). This is canon within the canon with a vengeance. Toussaint (*Behold the King* 319) also favors a view of 28:20a that distinguishes between what Jesus taught in general and what he taught with the intention that his disciples also teach it. Surprisingly, even *πάντα ὅσα* (“whatsoever”) is understood in a restrictive manner which narrows the disciples' responsibilities, and even more puzzlingly, it is affirmed that Jesus “did not instruct by means of commandments.”

⁸⁰ D. L. Turner, “Fulfill the Measure of your Ancestors' (Matt 23:32): Jesus as the Ultimate Rejected Prophet in the Gospel of Matthew” (Ph.D. diss., HUC-JIR, 2009) 130–32. The scholarly consensus of a widespread Moses typology in Matthew is itself cautionary for discontinuity dispensationalism.

⁸¹ Kelly, *Matthew* 519.

(1) The preaching of John and Jesus is not so much an offer of a physical kingdom as a call to conversion and discipleship which will form the nucleus of the church Jesus will build. The message of God's saving reign is consistent throughout Matthew's Gospel. The kingdom is both present and future; it is experienced, anticipated, and inaugurated by Jesus' redemptive work (5:3–10; 12:28–29; 26:28–29). Both Jesus' gospel proclamation and his ethical teaching are centered on God's reign and are incumbent on the church today.⁸²

(2) The Sermon on the Mount is a timeless biblical ethic for all of Jesus' disciples. Thankfully, relatively few current discontinuity dispensationalists wish to distance the Sermon on the Mount from the ethics of the church.

(3) The parables of the kingdom describe the mixed response to the kingdom message proclaimed by Jesus, the Twelve, and the global church founded on them. Matthew 12–13 presents neither Israel's national rejection of Jesus nor God's rejection of national Israel. Rather, the parables of Matthew 13 present new truth about the present phase of the kingdom from the days of Jesus to the end of the age.

(4) The church which Jesus is building on the apostolic foundation has been invested with authority as the human agency through which God extends his rule. The church is not the kingdom, yet it is not discontinuous with the kingdom. It would be impotent apart from its stewardship of the message about the kingdom.

(5) Jesus' apostles and the fruit-bearing church built upon them have been "given" custody of the kingdom. The church is inseparably linked in redemptive-historical continuity with Israel since its apostles are Israel's new leaders and ultimate rulers (Matt 19:28).

(6) Jesus' eschatological discourse encompasses both a now-past event, the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, and a future event, the appearing of Jesus to judge the world. In keeping with the prophetic genre of this discourse, its promises are presented not so much in terms of predictive specificity as in terms of ethical implication.

(7) If the church is to faithfully obey its Lord's global commission, it must come to terms with its Jewish roots, in this case with the prophetic-apocalyptic authoritative presence of its exalted Lord Jesus. This equips the church to fulfill its role as the vehicle through which Torah, as fulfilled through the instruction and example of Jesus, is extended to all the nations of the earth.

Their disparate views of these seven *cruces* underline the clear differences between discontinuity and progressive dispensational approaches to Matthew. But what of the alleged slippery slope, the disputed border between progressive dispensationalism and covenant premillennialism? In general terms, Hoch correctly characterized the two as having different approaches

⁸² Despite Bailey's stress on the discontinuity of Matthew 13 with previous kingdom texts in Matthew, he nonetheless states ("The Parable of the Sower" 187) that the kingdom message which Israel rejected is the same message which is forming the church today. This is a helpful way of putting the essential continuity of the gospel message, one which some discontinuity dispensationalists would likely disavow.

to the relationship of Israel and the church. As Hoch put it, the church *replaces* Israel in covenant premillennialism, but *includes* and *extends* Israel in progressive dispensationalism.⁸³ The two models are quite distinct, involving discontinuity and continuity respectively. More specifically, in terms of the exegesis of Matthew, it seems clear that progressive dispensationalism's comprehensive and holistic view of the kingdom announced by John and Jesus is closer to the physical view of discontinuity dispensationalism than the spiritual view of covenant premillennialism.⁸⁴ Another clear difference would be progressive dispensationalism's literal understanding of Matt 19:28, which posits the twelve apostles ruling over twelve tribes of Israel in a time described as *παλιγγενεσία*, "renewal."⁸⁵ In this text Jesus envisions the climax of prophetic hope and the final restoration of national Israel, a concept identified by R. L. Saucy as "the primary tenet of dispensationalism."⁸⁶ Saucy is correct; literal hermeneutics, the separation of Israel and the church, and a doxological view of history pale in comparison to this crucial theological watershed. Granted, other evangelical theological systems allow for an eschatological national conversion of Israel, but such systems tend to view Israel as joining the church, as it were, instead of experiencing the ultimate blessing promised by its own prophets. In dispensationalism, it is not so much Israel joining the church as the church joining Israel, that is, partaking of blessings which were originally covenanted to Israel and then mysteriously extended to the Gentiles by the grace of God through Messiah Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel is an appropriate text for debate among dispensationalists. There can be no doubt that in Matthew the church's identity and mission are deeply rooted in biblical events, ethics, and promises. However, dispensationalists have been reticent to explore the implications of all this. May the exalted Lord of the church, who came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, and who commanded his followers to teach all the nations to obey all that he had taught, provide wisdom and direction for those who ponder these things together as stewards of the mysteries of God.⁸⁷

⁸³ C. B. Hoch Jr., *All Things New: The Significance of Newness for Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 255–62. It is not so much that the church includes Israel but that Israel includes the church. Hoch characterized discontinuity dispensationalism's view of the church temporarily replacing Israel during the parenthetical present age as the church *interrupting* Israel. See also Blaising and Bock's discussion of the church and Israel in *Progressive Dispensationalism* 49–51. R. L. Saucy articulates a progressive dispensational perspective on the distinction between Israel and the Church in "Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments* (ed. J. S. Feinberg; Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988) 239–59.

⁸⁴ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 236–45; Saucy, *Case* 81–87.

⁸⁵ Lowery, "Evidence" 177–79.

⁸⁶ Saucy, *Case* 91. Saucy develops this position in "The Crucial Issue between Dispensational and Nondispensational Systems," *CTR* 1 (1986) 149–65.

⁸⁷ I thank Prof. Phil Lueck and the steering committee of the ETS Dispensational Study Group for the invitation to present an earlier version of this paper at the 2009 annual meeting in New Orleans. I also thank Prof. Mark Bailey for his cordial yet pointed response to the paper at that meeting.