

The Gospel of Conflict: Struggle and Longing in the book of Matthew*

William Loader

Conflict is never far from human experience. So conflict is an essential framework for approaching the gospels. The gospels originate with Jesus and his life among people living in struggle and hoping for radical change. The conflict was between the way things are and the way things need to be. People cried out for relief from the powers which ordered their lives. For some that cry was muffled in an inarticulate poverty; for others it voiced itself in hymns and songs of liberation. Jesus' good news in answer to the people's longing was to declare God's reign. The poor and the hungry are blessed in that promise; change will come. Jesus declared hope and lived it radically in acts of healing and inclusion that crossed traditional boundaries.

Our heritage is one of people crying for change. To be faithful to that heritage and to understand it, we need a conflict perspective, not least in solidarity with all who long for change today.

Of the gospels Matthew has the most to say about conflict, although not as a major theme. It is nevertheless a significant sub-theme. Matthew's gospel, though five decades down the track from Jesus, still reflects a context of struggle and longing. Hopes for a Messiah and fulfillment of prophetic promises runs as a formula throughout Matthew's gospel. Hope is realized in healing and community, but there is more to come. Political conflict frames Matthew's story: Herod massacres the infants only to miss the King of the Jews, but Pilate makes up for it.

CONFLICT IN MATTHEW also has a religious dimension. Stereotyping Jesus' opponents to reflect issues of his own day, Matthew contrasts a strict application of Law informed by compassion with one apparently bereft of compassion. Mark introduces Jesus' public ministry under the rubric: "He taught them as authority and not as the scribes" (1:22). Matthew omits the synagogue scene and revises this phrase to summarize the impact of the Sermon on the Mount: "He taught them with authority and not as *their* scribes" (7:29). Jesus, who for Matthew will retain every stroke of biblical law, is the model scribe whose notion of goodness surpasses the best his opponents have to offer and must do so also for his followers.

The experience of Matthew's community is marked by dissonance and dissension. Scholarly debate continues over whether members of Matthew's group were still hanging in within the synagogue fold or had cut loose. Continued acknowledgement of scribes' authority—though not their integrity (23:2-3)—suggests a Jewish communal setting. Inclusion of Gentiles suggests growing openness beyond that setting. It is likely that Matthew's Christians feel themselves disenfranchised or marginalized, effectively separated if not formally so, but still both affirming Torah and insisting their Jesus is its best interpreter.

Conflict in Matthew also reflects tensions with other Christians. When Matthew's Jesus declares, "Do not think that I have to destroy the Law and the Prophets" (5:17), and insists on detailed observance, he doubtless has targets. Unbelieving Jews saw the Jesus innovations as undermining Torah. Such reassurance about the role of the Torah also wards off Christians who seem more interested in their self-indulgent spirituality than in doing the will of God. For them Matthew's Jesus has harsh words (see 7:21-23). Paul's response to such people in his time was 1 Corinthians 13. John's Jesus told them to be born again (2:23-3:3).

In upholding Torah Matthew's focus is not codification but compassion. His saying about tithing (23:23) illustrates this dramatically: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you

tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, compassion, and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced.” But he does not stop there. He continues: “without neglecting the rest”! For Matthew every stroke of the Law still stands; the key is recognizing where the priorities lie—what matters most.

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW not only bristles with conflict as an underlying theme. It also addresses conflict directly more than any other gospel. When Matthew illustrates Jesus’ upholding of the Law and the Prophets by giving six examples, he turns first to anger and murder (5:21-26). Jesus stands well within Jewish tradition in going beyond actions to attitudes. The focus is not feelings here anymore than it is sexual feelings in the exposition of the commandment about adultery in 5:27-28. The focus is on what we do with feelings, how we direct them.

The words of 5:22 take a legislative form and may playfully identify local courts, regional courts (Sanhedrin), and the divine court. If we mistake the rhetoric for reality we face a conundrum of explaining why one term of abuse is more serious than another. This is not, however, legislation but shock tactics, like plucking out eyes and cutting off hands in 5:29-30. It means: Take the handling of anger seriously! Even the two further illustrations are playful in this serious way: the absurdity of returning to Galilee to reconcile with someone who has a grudge against you (5:23-24) and the pragmatism of settling out of court (5:25-26).

In designing the six examples Matthew follows a typical pattern of having the first and last relate to each other. Loving one’s enemy (5:43-48), the last, makes the same point on a broader scale as the first. We never write another person off. We never give up on people. This is true, because this is how God is (5:45). God’s being informs our being and the way we relate to people. It also informs the fifth: the warning about resistance and fighting back (5:38-42). *We don’t fight people.*

Such a stance invites elaboration far beyond the scope of this essay. It has implications at the level of family, workplace, and also relations between communities and nations. Models of suppressing anger (often inspired by misreading our passage as proscribing feelings) and then exploding or transferring it inappropriately or swallowing it into self-destruction and depression are familiar enough and persistently relevant. Demonizing or dehumanizing others takes many forms at all levels. Hate is very up-to-date.

Matthew’s principle of “justice, compassion, and faith” (23:23) accompanies us into complexities untouched by his few words, including the use of restraining force to protect victims and resist oppressors, and the exercise of law. Use of force in restraint must be an absolute last resort. Otherwise we play to our pathologies and generate self-reproducing chaos. In all there is no room for hate.

THE PRIORITY OF LOVE in handling conflict leaves its traces at various points in the gospel. The beatitudes hail the peacemakers. People need help to hear each other’s pain beyond each other’s anger. The Sermon on the Mount warns against condemning others (7:1-5) and at its heart speaks of forgiving others as God forgives us (6:14-15). Its call to be “perfect” (5:48) reformulates the call found in Luke to be “merciful” or “compassionate” (Luke 6:36). But as the context set by the verses preceding Matthew 5:48 shows, Matthew’s focus is qualitative, not statistical and amounts to the same meaning as Luke’s version.

Most dramatic is 18:15-18. This quaint first-century rule enjoins: Deal with the problem where it belongs—thus, don’t gossip about it to others while doing nothing! If that fails, take someone with you—so avoid shaming people. As a last resort, in the face of intransigence, bring it to the whole church. Perhaps Matthew has in mind the abuse of children flagged earlier in the

chapter—as likely to be sexual as it is today. The community must face such issues squarely and act. The promise of answered prayer and of the presence of Jesus with the two or three (18:19-20) has its original context here, where the church faces difficult situations and cannot avoid making judgment, playing a kind of God-role (18:18).

The most disconcerting feature is the attitude to the wrongdoer: “treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector” (18:17), meaning have nothing to do with him!??? But what if we treat them as Jesus treated them!??? Perhaps in response Matthew might leap to his own defense. If we give him the benefit of the doubt that he included this discipline code uncensored, he might remind us what he has done with it. Immediately before this passage he has re-jigged Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep. It applies Jesus’ original defense of his compassion for sinners (including tax collectors) to urge compassion for members of the congregation who go astray (18:12-14). And then, in case we missed that point, he follows it with the exhortation to forgive 77 times (18:21-22) and the parable about forgiving debts as huge as a local economy (18:23-35).

This is not the only passage where Matthew’s stance includes ambiguities and seems, itself, to be in conflict. He concludes Jesus’ ministry with a striking portrait of the final performance appraisal of all nations that defies all nominal loyalties and reduces the criteria to compassion (25:31-46). The sheep represent people who loved others because they were in need, not because they saw Jesus or God in them. Jesus surprises them: It was like they did it to him. But the same passage, like many in Matthew, seeks to motivate such a stance by depicting eternal punishment for the noncompliant.

Motivating love by threats of violence? Matthew’s close alignment of Jesus with John the Baptist (e.g. 3:2 = 4:17; 3:10 = 7:19) reinforces the impression that he intends the strategy. Read off the page in this way such a theology tell us that in the end God writes people off and subjects people to violence without reprieve. Such images create slippage in our own behavior: If God is like that in the end, violent justice is the ultimate value. As this slips into current daily life, it justifies my own violence and my writing people off, especially when I believe I am right and good. The “final solution” thus subverts compassion, reducing it at worst to a temporary stunt in the life of God and making Jesus an exception in the life of God, the one who must buy off this violence to protect us from this God. So we become purveyors of a heritage of violence. History provides ample witness of its effect. The cross becomes a sword.

Yet seeing such connections honestly need not descend to moralism. The grotesque images belong to the fantasies of people baffled by injustice. Matthew’s community surely wondered how injustice can go unaddressed. Will people really get away with it? These are the dreamings of those who otherwise see no hope. Compassion must surely include confrontation—mercy can’t be separated from justice. But the tensions and dangers must be acknowledged. Christ cannot be reduced to an exception in the life of God or we betray something central to the tradition. Scripture is itself testimony to the struggle and embodies the ambiguity. Critical engagement cannot escape facing where the gospel bears destruction and discerning where it bears life. Matthew offers us more than enough to affirm God’s goodness as compassion and to discern the counter-currents present in his apocalyptic pedagogy and alive in our world today.

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