



THE DISCIPLES AND THE CROWDS IN MATTHEW

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Jeff A. Coleman

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It is interesting the gospel of Matthew provided the impetus for John MacArthur to write *The Gospel According to Jesus*. In the preface of that book's most recent edition, MacArthur writes:

Thirty years ago (in January of 1978) I began preaching through the gospel of Matthew verse by verse. That series lasted seven and a half years, comprising some 226 sermons—and Grace Community Church was dramatically changed in the process. ...A few years after finishing that series in Matthew, I wrote this book to distill my observations about how Jesus proclaimed His own gospel and to take a hard look at the truths He included in the gospel message. I knew the book would be controversial, of course, because I wrote it partly as a response to an already-existing controversy. But I did not anticipate what a large and far-reaching debate it would spark. For the next couple of years, the subjects dealt with in this book seemed to dominate the evangelical discussion—and then to a lesser degree, the debate has continued ever since.¹

The controversy MacArthur refers to is the one between Free Grace Salvation advocates, such as Zane Hodges and Charles Ryrie, and Lordship Salvation advocates, such as MacArthur.

For MacArthur and other Lordship Salvation advocates, evangelism and discipleship are essentially synonyms. To be saved, one must not only believe in Jesus' person and work but also agree to follow Jesus wholeheartedly as Lord. In other words, a believer must commit to discipleship or he is not a believer at all. Thus, the stringent discipleship requirements in the gospel of Matthew² are the standard of justification. To believe in Jesus essentially means to be willing to take a cross, follow Jesus, and lose one's life for Jesus' sake (Matt 10:38-39).

¹ John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Is Authentic Faith?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

² For example, Matt 8:18-22 and 10:37-39.

For Hodges, Ryrie, and other Free Grace Salvation advocates, evangelism and discipleship are separate issues. Faith in Jesus' person and work delivers one from the penalty of sin (justification), whereas discipleship delivers one from the power of sin (sanctification). Thus, discipleship is synonymous with sanctification. Under this view, a believer who is justified may never become a disciple by taking a cross, following Jesus, and losing his life for Jesus' sake (Matt 10:38-39). Such a believer forfeits rewards at the judgment seat of Christ,³ but he or she will nevertheless enter the Messianic kingdom and live forever with God.

This paper seeks to prove two points. First, in the area of soteriology, Matthew's gospel supports the Free Grace Salvation position. This will be demonstrated by showing that the crowds in Matthew, often designated by the term ὄχλοι, generally describe a group of people who are justified and therefore entering the Messianic kingdom. Second, in the areas of sanctification and ecclesiology, Matthew views discipleship not as a sanctification concept but as a church leadership concept. In other words, discipleship does not equal sanctification. Disciples, designated by the term μαθηταί, are fishers of people, shepherds of sheep, harvest-workers, and servant-slaves of Jesus whose responsibility is to proclaim the gospel and lead the crowds (ὄχλοι) of believers in their sanctification process, which is the essence of the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). In other words, for Matthew, while every believer is called to obey Jesus' commands, the reality is not every believer will become a disciple (μαθητής).

Preliminary Matters

³ 1 Cor 3:10-15; 4:1-5; 2 Cor 5:9-10.

Before various passages in Matthew are considered, the author's presuppositions, assumptions, and some preliminary conclusions should be clearly stated.

First, in every dispensation, including the period of Jesus' first coming, justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Messiah Jesus alone.⁴ Matthew's usual way of describing justification is "entering the kingdom of heaven."⁵ Further, "entering the kingdom of heaven" differs from "inheriting the kingdom of heaven."⁶ The former has to do with justification, while the latter has to do with rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. The "kingdom of heaven" is the literal, earthly, physical, 1000-year Messianic kingdom predicted in the Old Testament and described in Rev 20:1-6.

Second, during his first coming Jesus revealed his identity as the Messianic, divine-human, prophet-priest-king in a progressive manner. As a result, the content of belief necessary for justification progressively increased during Jesus' life and among different sets of people. After his resurrection and ascension, the content of belief necessary for justification increased dramatically, as seen in the sermons of Peter, Stephen, and Paul in Acts. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, however, it was not necessary for a believer to completely understand Jesus'

⁴ See the chapter "Salvation in Dispensationalism," in Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 2007).

⁵ Matt 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23; 23:13.

⁶ Matt 19:29.

deity. One needed only to believe that Jesus was the promised Messianic king.⁷ After the resurrection and ascension, however, belief in Jesus' deity became required.⁸

Third, for purposes of this paper, Matthew will be read in a historical-literary manner with little attention to the other Gospels. This is because in the early church, Matthew was circulated separately and was intended to be read as a stand-alone document. As the author of a stand-alone document, it was Matthew's prerogative, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to define his own terms. Thus, Matthew will be allowed to characterize the crowds (ὄχλοι), the Jewish people (λαός), and the disciples (μαθηταί) for purposes of his own gospel. If he shows he is using these terms in a technical manner, we must read them in that way. There is certainly a place for reading Matthew canonically, theologically, and horizontally, especially in relation to the other two Synoptic Gospels. But it is first important to read the gospel of Matthew on its own terms, which is what this paper does.

Fourth, for Matthew, terms such as ὄχλος and μαθητής are literary terms, not scientific terms. So, for example, when Matthew says in Matt 7:28 that the crowds (ὄχλοι) were amazed at Jesus' teaching, he is not saying absolutely 100% of the individuals in the crowd were amazed at Jesus' teaching. He is speaking in generalities. He is saying that, in general, the crowds of people overhearing the Sermon on the Mount were amazed. Similarly, when Jesus issues his seven woes against the scribes and Pharisees in Matt 23, he is viewing these groups generally. He is not

⁷ "Change your mindsets, because the Messianic kingdom is near!" (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7) was an announcement that the Messianic kingdom was available to the Jewish people. The Messiah had come! Cf. John 1:35-51.

⁸ For example, the disciple Thomas followed Jesus for three years, yet it was only after the resurrection that it became clear to him that Jesus was God in the flesh (John 20:28). Only at Caesarea Philippi did it dawn on Peter who exactly Jesus was (Matt 16:16-20), and even then Jesus wanted only a handful of people to know that fact (Matt 16:20).

saying that absolutely every scribe and Pharisee fits the description he is giving. We use language in a similar way all the time. If I say, “The students who attended the missions conference were extremely excited about foreign missions,” I am not speaking in a scientific way of absolutely 100% of the students who attended. I am unable to say that every single student was extremely motivated. Rather, I am speaking of the students in general. Matthew speaks in this way throughout his gospel.

Fifth, the conflict in Matthew is between two hierarchical groups, one good and one evil, as shown in the following table:

	The Side of Good	The Side of Evil
Tier one	Jesus	The Jewish leaders
Tier two	Jesus’ disciples (μαθηται)	The disciples of the Jewish leaders (μαθηται)
Tier three	The crowds (ὄχλοι) of believers, both Jews and Gentiles	The Jewish people (λαός)

One very noticeable pattern in Matthew is the favorable description of tier three of the side of good, the ὄχλοι, as composed to the very unfavorable description of all tiers on the side of evil, and particularly of tier one of the side of evil. In other words, the good response of the ὄχλοι (“crowds”) to Jesus is constantly contrasted to the bad response of the Jewish leaders and the λαός (“people”) to Jesus. Nearly every time it is used,⁹ the term ὄχλος indicates a group of people, who are responding favorably to Jesus as compared to the Jewish leaders. By contrast, Matthew seems to use the term λαός (“people”) to identify the mass of Jewish people who follow the Jewish leaders in their rejection of Jesus. Likely, literary irony is being employed by Matthew. Far from what is expected, it is the Galilean and Judean mobs, signified by the

⁹ Except for the ὄχλοι of Jerusalem specifically controlled by the Jewish leaders in Matt 26-27 (Matt 26:47, 55; 27:20).

somewhat pejorative term ὄχλοι (“crowds” or “mobs”), who accept Jesus and his message.

Meanwhile the Jewish leaders, supposedly steeped in the Old Testament and the ones who would be expected to be the first to welcome the Messianic king, are the ones who reject Jesus and demand his death.

Sixth, for purposes of Matthew, Jesus only heals those who believe in him and his authority. This point is crucial. According to Matt 13:58, Jesus did not do many miracles in Nazareth because of the unbelief of its residents (διὰ τὴν ἀπιστίαν αὐτῶν).¹⁰ A very reasonable inference is that where there is faith in Jesus and his authority, he heals. Where there is no faith in Jesus and his authority, he does not heal. Indeed, faith in Jesus’ authority is one of the most important themes of Matt 8-12. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that members of the ὄχλοι who are being healed in and around Capernaum believe in Jesus and his authority; otherwise he would not heal. This is not to say every Jew in Capernaum believes in Jesus, which is of course not the case. But what appears relatively certain is that the group of people Matthew calls ὄχλοι generally do believe in Jesus and his authority. By believing in Messiah Jesus, they have done what is necessary to enter the Messianic kingdom. The Jewish leaders of Capernaum, of course, refuse to believe. But overall the response to Jesus is much more favorable in Capernaum than it is in Nazareth, as indicated by the numerous healings.¹¹

Seventh, geographical locations are extremely important in Matthew and give an indication of a particular group’s receptivity to Jesus and his message. Matthew consistently

¹⁰ διὰ plus the accusative indicates cause (*BDAG*, 225-26).

¹¹ Jesus’ denunciation against Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum in Matt 11:20-24 is directed at the Jewish leaders in those communities and the λαός who follow them in disbelief, not the ὄχλοι. The ὄχλοι are the “infants” (Matt 11:25) who are coming to Jesus for rest (Matt 11:28-29).

emphasizes the geographical separation of himself, his μαθηταί, and the ὄχλοι who believe in him from the Jewish leaders and the cities they control. When Jesus enters into the cities of Capernaum and Jerusalem, conflict is inevitable. Jesus is on enemy territory. But when Jesus is outside these cities, often on a mountain or hill (the Sermon on the Mount, the Mount of Olives, the mount of the Great Commission), he is on friendly turf. He is often surrounded by his μαθηταί who are themselves surrounded by the ὄχλοι of believers. Think of a Greek amphitheater. Jesus is on stage teaching, the μαθηταί are on the front row, listening closely, and the ὄχλοι of believers are in the rows behind. Once the μαθηταί understand Jesus’ message, they are to spread out among the ὄχλοι of believers to relay that message. This is exactly what is indicated by the Sermon the Mount, the feeding of the 5000, the feeding of the 4000, and the Great Commission. To say that every believer is a μαθητής is saying that every believer is and must be on the front row. This is never the picture Matthew presents. There are believers, and there are disciples who minister to those believers after spending quality time under the direct tutelage of Jesus.

Matthew’s Characterization of the ὄχλοι, the λαός, and the μαθηταί

It is now appropriate to closely examine how Matthew portrays three different groups, the ὄχλοι (“crowds”), the λαός (“people”), and the μαθηταί (“disciples”).¹² The characterization is summarized in the following table:

	The Side of Good	The Side of Evil
Tier one	Jesus	The Jewish leaders

¹² We could add a fourth group, the Jewish leaders (chief priests, elders, scribes, Pharisees). However, all commentators agree the Jewish leaders are portrayed by Matthew in a very negative light, so an examination of how Matthew characterizes them is not necessary.

	The Side of Good	The Side of Evil
Tier two	Jesus' disciples (μαθηταί)	Their disciples (μαθηταί)
Tier three	The crowds (ὄχλοι) of believers, both Jews and Gentiles	The Jewish people (λαός)

For Matthew, the term ὄχλος (pl. ὄχλοι) generally describes people who come, often from very far away, to follow¹³ Jesus (Matt 4:25; 8:1; 14:13; 19:2).¹⁴ They tend to be from the lower or middle classes of Jewish society, including “children” (παιδιά)(Matt 18:2-5; 19:3-4) and “insignificant ones” (μικροί)(Matt 10:42; 11:11; 18:6; 10; 14). “Tax collectors” (τελῶναι)(Matt 9:10-11; 11:19; 21:31-32) and “sinners” (ἁμαρτωλοί)(Matt 9:10-13; 11:19) coming to Jesus also belong to this group. The ὄχλοι desire to listen to Jesus’ teaching (Matt 13:1-2), sometimes going without food to do so (15:32). The ὄχλοι are often not the primary recipients of Jesus’ teaching (Matt 5:1), and Jesus often speaks to them in parables (Matt 13:3, 34). Nevertheless, the response of the ὄχλοι to Jesus’ teaching is generally positive, especially compared to the response of the Jewish leaders. The ὄχλοι are amazed at Jesus’ teaching (Matt 7:28; 22:33) and recognize his teaching authority (Matt 7:29). The ὄχλοι are also convinced of Jesus’ authority to heal, as evidenced by their bringing their crippled, lame, and sick from far away to him (Matt 15:30; 19:2). They are amazed at the miracles he performs (Matt 9:8, 33; 15:31) and “glorify God” in response (Matt 9:8; 15:31; cf. Matt 5:16). The ὄχλοι say things like, “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel” (Matt 9:33); “This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?” (Matt 12:23); and “Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Matt 21:9). Jesus has compassion for the ὄχλοι (Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32) and desires them to have

¹³ ἀκολουθέω.

¹⁴ The exception is Matt 26-27.

good leadership (Matt 9:36). The ὄχλοι previously went out to see John the Baptist (Matt 11:7), and they regard John as a prophet (Matt 14:5; 21:26). Very significantly, Jesus twice feeds the ὄχλοι through his μαθηταὶ (Matt 14:19; 15:36), and Jesus warns the ὄχλοι about the teaching of the Jewish leaders (Matt 15:10-11; 23:1). The ὄχλοι sometimes prevent people from coming to Jesus (Matt 20:31).¹⁵ Nevertheless, they follow¹⁶ Jesus into Jerusalem (Matt 20:29) and welcome him into that city as the Messianic Son of David (Matt 21:8-9). They also believe Jesus is a prophet (Matt 21:11, 46). Only in Matt 26-27 is the term ὄχλος used to describe enemies of Jesus (Matt 26:47, 55; 27:15, 20, 24). However, Matthew consistently points out that these ὄχλοι are being directed by the Jewish leaders (Matt 26:47; 27:20). They are portrayed as a different group of people, likely residents of Jerusalem (Matt 2:3) who are more aligned to the Jewish leaders' way of thinking. The overall weight of the evidence strongly indicates Matthew views the ὄχλοι in a positive light, leading to the conclusion that until Matt 26, the term ὄχλοι generally describes people who believe in Jesus as the Messianic king and who will therefore enter the Messianic kingdom. The fact they are not μαθηταὶ does not prevent their entering the kingdom.

Matthew uses the term λαός (“people”)¹⁷ differently. For Matthew, the term λαός signifies the Jewish people generally and very often the mass of Jewish unbelievers.¹⁸ Members of the Jewish λαός are would-be believers in Jesus (Matt 10:5-7), but most of them decide in favor of

¹⁵ This does not indicate disbelief. The μαθηταὶ are guilty of the same sin (Matt 15:23).

¹⁶ ἀκολουθέω.

¹⁷ The term λαός signifies people or a populace in a general sense. It is “the mass of a community as distinguished from special interest groups” and in contrast to leaders, Pharisees, legal experts and priests (*BDAG*, 586). In Matthew, the term always views the mass of Jewish people as a nation.

¹⁸ The reader of an English Bible will likely not be able to recognize Matthew’s strategic use of the terms λαός and ὄχλος. Most English versions translate both these terms using both English words “crowd” and “people,” as if they were synonyms.

the Jewish leaders and against Jesus. Jesus comes to save the Jewish λαός from their sins (Matt 1:21) and to rule them as a shepherd (Matt 2:6). They are the ones sitting in darkness who see a great light (Matt 4:16), and Jesus heals diseases and sicknesses among them as a proof of his Messiahship (Matt 4:23). However, the heart of the λαός is dull (Matt 13:15; cf. 15:8). Matthew emphasizes it is the scribes (γραμματεῖς) and elders (πρεσβύτεροι) of the λαός (Matt 2:4; 21:23; 26:3, 47, 27:1) who lead the λαός in rejection of Jesus. Very significantly, it is the λαός, not the ὄχλοι, who say, “His blood will be on us and on our children!” (Matt 27:25). Matthew’s point is that the Jewish λαός, under the direction of the Jewish leaders reject Jesus.¹⁹ After Jesus’ resurrection, the Jewish leaders are particularly concerned that many among the Jewish λαός will be persuaded to join the side of Jesus (Matt 27:64), a thing the ὄχλοι outside of Jerusalem have already done.

For Matthew, the term μαθητής (pl. μαθηταὶ) is a technical term for an apprentice, disciple or pupil²⁰ of Jesus. The μαθηταὶ undergo personal tutelage in order to become fishers of people (Matt 4:19), shepherds of sheep (Matt 9:36), harvest-workers (Matt 9:37-38), and servant-slaves of Jesus (Matt 10:24-25). Jesus often separates from the ὄχλοι to engage his μαθηταὶ in personal, in-depth instruction (Matt 5:1; 8:18; 11:1; 13:10, 36; 16:13, 20-21; 17:10-13; 20:17; 24:3; 26:1, 20, 26; 28:16) or for one-time supernatural revelations (Matt 8:23; 9:19; 14:22, 26; 17:1, 6; 21:20). Jesus demands that his μαθηταὶ follow him consistently, urgently, and wholeheartedly (Matt 4:18-22; 8:18-22; 9:9) because they are to be his official representatives and spokespersons (Matt 10:1-7; 28:18-20). The μαθηταὶ are not above their teacher, Jesus, but

¹⁹ Again, the ὄχλοι of Matt 4-25 are not a part of the Jewish λαός in Matt 27:25.

²⁰ See *BDAG*, 609.

must become like him (Matt 10:24-25). They must take up their crosses daily and follow him, losing their lives in this world (Matt 10:37-39; 16:24). The μαθηταὶ are comparable to the Old Testament prophets and righteous men (Matt 5:11-12; 10:41; 23:34), and to David's mighty men (Matt 12:3; cf. 1 Sam 21:4-5). They are relationally closer to Jesus than members of Jesus' own family (Matt 12:49; cf. Mark 3:31-35). Due to their present and future responsibilities as fishers of people, shepherds of sheep, harvest-workers, and servant-slaves, Jesus explains the meaning of parables to the μαθηταὶ but does not to the ὄχλοι (Matt 13:10, 36). Paradigmatically, it is the μαθηταὶ through whom Jesus feeds the ὄχλος of five thousand (Matt 14:15, 19) and the ὄχλος of four thousand (Matt 15:32-33, 36). Jesus' μαθηταὶ are not perfect. Like the ὄχλοι (Matt 20:31), the μαθηταὶ wrongfully act to keep people away from Jesus (Matt 15:23; 19:13; 26:8). They make promises they do not keep (Matt 26:35, 56) and fail to remain alert (Matt 26:40, 45). Peter, the chief μαθητής, denies Jesus three times (Matt 26:69-75). Nevertheless, the μαθηταὶ are those who have left everything to follow Jesus in order to become leaders of the ὄχλοι of believers during his first coming (Matt 10:1-7) and afterwards (Matt 28:16-20). As a result of their service, they will receive rewards and inherit eternal life (Matt 19:27-29).²¹

Based on Matthew's characterization of the ὄχλοι, the λαός, and the μαθηταὶ, Matthew's storyline becomes apparent. Jesus is the promised Messianic king who invites the Jewish λαός to change their way of thinking and believe into him in order to enter the Messianic kingdom he will rule. Some members of the Jewish λαός, generally designated by Matthew using the term ὄχλος, are those who respond to Jesus' invitation. From those ὄχλοι, Jesus specially calls a

²¹ As stated before, to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:3) is different than inheriting eternal life (Matt 19:29).

relatively small number of μαθηταί. These μαθηταί are personally trained by Jesus to be fishers of men, shepherds of the sheep, harvest-workers, and servant-slaves of Jesus. After Jesus' ascension, these μαθηταί will lead the ὄχλοι of believers until Jesus returns (Matt 28:18-20).

The Paradigm: Jesus, the μαθηταί, and the ὄχλοι

On the two occasions in Matthew when Jesus feeds the ὄχλοι in the wilderness, Matthew clarifies the relationship between Jesus, the μαθηταί, and the ὄχλοι. This is the paradigm Matthew wishes his readers to apply to the entire book of Matthew and especially to the Great Commission. Just as Jesus delivers physical food to the μαθηταί for them to pass on to the ὄχλοι, so Jesus delivers spiritual food, in the form of teaching and example, to the μαθηταί for them to pass on to the ὄχλοι, which is the essence of the Great Commission. Jesus' ultimate concern is not that all the ὄχλοι become μαθηταί²² but that all the ὄχλοι get fed. Matthew relates in Matt 14:13-22:

13 Now when Jesus heard [about the beheading of John], he withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by himself. And when the ὄχλοι heard, they followed him on foot from the cities. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a large ὄχλος,²³ and felt compassion for them and healed their sick. 15 When it was evening, the μαθηταί came to him and said, This place is desolate and the hour is already late, so send the ὄχλοι away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves. 16 But Jesus said to them, They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat! 17 They said to him, We have here only five loaves and two fish. 18 And he said, Bring them here to me. 19 Ordering the ὄχλοι to sit down on the grass, he took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up into the sky, he blessed it, and breaking the loaves he gave them to the μαθηταί, and

²² After Jesus satisfies the hunger of the ὄχλοι through the μαθηταί, he sends the ὄχλοι away (Matt 10:22). But he continues on with the μαθηταί. The next event Matthew narrates is Jesus' walking on the water before the μαθηταί (Matt 10:23-33).

²³ Cf. Matt 15:33.

the μαθηταὶ to the ὄχλοι,²⁴ 20 and they all ate and were satisfied.²⁵ They picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets. 21 There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children. 22 Immediately he made the μαθηταὶ get into the boat and go ahead to the other side, while he sent the ὄχλοι away.²⁶

There are many interesting details to notice about this account. First, in the flow of Matthew, this pericope takes place after the Jewish leaders have registered their official rejection of Jesus (Matt 12:13, 41-42), after the parables of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 13), and just after Herod has beheaded John the Baptist (Matt 14:10). The response of the ὄχλοι to Jesus sharply contrasts to the response of the Jewish leaders and Herod. Matthew places these responses side by side intentionally. Second, the fact that the ὄχλοι are following Jesus on foot from the cities to a desolate, secluded place²⁷ is highly significant. The ὄχλοι have no reason to be there other than that Jesus the Messiah is there. This scene takes place away from the city of Capernaum on purpose. Also significant is Jesus' own response to this large ὄχλος. He feels compassion (σπλαγχνίζομαι) for them,²⁸ heals their sick, and refuses to send them away hungry.²⁹ These details indicate the ὄχλος have done what they need to do—faith alone in Messiah Jesus alone—to enter the Messianic kingdom. Further, as always in the gospel of Matthew, the μαθηταὶ are set apart from the ὄχλοι as a distinct group of people. It is the job of the μαθηταὶ to distribute food to the ὄχλοι. Matthew records that all ate and were filled (χορτάζω), implying the ὄχλοι are filled

²⁴ Cf. Matt 15:36.

²⁵ Cf. Matt 15:37.

²⁶ Author's translation, loosely based on the NASB.

²⁷ Cf. Matt 15:33.

²⁸ Cf. Matt 15:32.

²⁹ Cf. Matt 15:32.

spiritually as well as physically.³⁰ The twelve full baskets left over teach that the needs of the μαθηταὶ will be met, even as they are meeting the needs of the ὄχλοι. The μαθηταὶ do not have to worry that Jesus will forget them! Every detail of this pericope contributes to its one very simple message: the ὄχλοι are believers who need to be fed spiritually,³¹ and the μαθηταὶ are Jesus' agents through whom he will do that. To put it in church age language—the ὄχλοι are believers in our churches, and the μαθηταὶ are the elders, deacons, pastors and teachers who are providing spiritual (and sometimes physical) food to those believers. Jesus' feeding of the five thousand is the basic model-paradigm-template for local churches today. Jesus feeds believers through disciples.³²

Confirmation: The Three Parables to the Jewish Leaders in Jerusalem

That Matthew's ὄχλοι are viewed as believers and that the μαθηταὶ are viewed as church leaders is confirmed in the three parables Jesus tells the Jewish leaders upon his entrance into Jerusalem (Matt 21:28-22:14). The first of these parables is the parable of the two sons (Matt 21:28-32):

28 ... A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, Son, go work today in the vineyard. 29 And he answered, I will not. But afterward he regretted it and went. 30 The man came to the second and said the same thing, and he answered, I

³⁰ Cf. Jn 6:41-58.

³¹ The message of the feeding of the four thousand (Matt 15:32-38) is exactly the same. Jesus repeats the lesson, and Matthew records the repetition, to emphasize to the μαθηταὶ that his chosen method of providing for the physical and spiritual needs of the ὄχλοι of believers is through them.

³² That Jesus desires to spiritually feed the ὄχλοι through the μαθηταὶ is one of the primary themes of Matthew. The μαθηταὶ are to take what Jesus has taught them (Matt 5:1-2) and teach the Jewish ὄχλοι (Matt 10:5-7) and then the ὄχλοι of all the nations (Matt 28:19-20), those who have been baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). "What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, proclaim on the housetops" (Matt 10:27). The μαθηταὶ are Jesus' spokesmen, which makes them leaders of the ὄχλοι.

will, sir. But he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the desire of his father? They said, The first. Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will precede you into the kingdom of God (εις την βασιλειαν του θεου). 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe (πιστεύω) him. But the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe (πιστεύω) him. And you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe (πιστεύω) him.³³

The message of this parable is simple. The tax collectors and prostitutes, members of the ὄχλοι who came to John at the Jordan River and believed his message, are entering the Messianic kingdom on the basis of that belief. There is no indication these tax collectors and prostitutes had to become μαθηταὶ in order to enter the Messianic kingdom, or that they automatically became μαθηταὶ when they believed John's message.³⁴ The response of the Jewish leaders to John and Jesus is set by Matthew in stark contrast with that of the ὄχλοι. This parable confirms that the people from Jerusalem, Judea, and the district around the Jordan who were baptized by John in the Jordan River (Matt 3:5-6) are believers who are entering the Messianic kingdom. By being baptized by John, these people were associating themselves with John, his message, and the coming Messiah.³⁵ Matthew does not use the term ὄχλος to describe these people in Matt 3, but the large ὄχλοι that follow Jesus in Matt 4:24-25 are the same kind and type of people who are coming to John in Matt 3:5-6. It is these large ὄχλοι of believers who need leadership. This

³³ Author's translation, loosely based on the NASB.

³⁴ In Matthew's gospel, Matthew himself stands out as the only person from the tax collector-sinner category who specifically becomes a μαθητής (Matt 9:9-10).

³⁵ Matthew's theme of the contrasting response to John and Jesus by the ὄχλοι and the Jewish leaders begins early in Matthew's gospel. John welcomes the ὄχλοι who are coming to him, but he sternly warns the Jewish leaders who are coming to him (Matt 3:7-12).

leadership is to be provided by the μαθηται³⁶ who Jesus specially calls (Matt 4:18-22) and trains (Matt 5:1-2) for that purpose.

The second of these parables is the parable of the vinegrowers (Matt 21:33-41):

33 There was a landowner (οικοδεσπότης) who planted a vineyard (ἀμπελών) and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vinegrowers (γεωργοὶ) and went on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves (δοῦλοι) to the vinegrowers (γεωργοὶ) to receive its fruits (καρπούς). 35 The vinegrowers (γεωργοὶ) took his slaves (δοῦλοι) and beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Again he sent another group of slaves (δοῦλοι) larger than the first, and they did the same thing to them. 37 But afterward he sent his son (υἱός) to them, saying, They will respect my son (υἱός). 38 But when the vinegrowers (γεωργοὶ) saw the son (υἱός), they said among themselves, This is the heir! Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance. 39 They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard (ἀμπελών) and killed him. 40 Therefore when the owner (κύριος) of the vineyard (ἀμπελών) comes, what will he do to those vinegrowers (γεωργοὶ)? 41 They said to him, He will bring those evil ones to an evil end and rent out the vineyard (ἀμπελών) to other vinegrowers (γεωργοὶ) who will pay him the fruits (καρπούς) at their fixed times.³⁷

Matthew's message could not be more clear. The Father is the landowner-lord who planted Israel, the vineyard. The Jewish leaders are the vinegrowers who the Father hired to produce fruits—Jewish believers in the Messiah. But these vinegrowers utterly failed in their responsibilities.³⁸ When the Father's slaves, the Old Testament prophets, were sent to the vinegrowers, their message was violently rejected. Now they are violently rejecting the Father's own Son. So the Father will bring the Jewish leaders to an evil end and rent out the vineyard

³⁶ The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to all of Jesus' μαθηται, not just the Twelve, who are chosen in Matt 10:1-4.

³⁷ Author's translation, loosely based on the NASB.

³⁸ One of the primary themes of the Old Testament is the complete failure of Jewish leadership, whether the leaders are judges, priests or kings. The final historical book of the Old Testament, Nehemiah, and the final prophetic book of the Old Testament, Malachi, end in frustration, particularly with the Jewish leaders. The message of the Old Testament is that the Messiah is desperately needed because all other Jewish leaders have failed. The Jewish leaders of Jesus' generation top off the failure.

(Israel) to other vinegrowers, who are the μαθηταί. The μαθηταί, in contrast to the Jewish leaders, will pay the Father the fruits—the ὄχλοι of believers—at the proper time. The fruits Jesus refers to are not the good works of believers who are all considered μαθηταί but the ὄχλοι of believers themselves.³⁹ The primary message of the parable is that the current Jewish leaders will be replaced by a new group of Jewish leaders, Jesus' μαθηταί. Jesus' μαθηταί will succeed where the past and current Jewish leaders have failed.⁴⁰

The third parable is the parable of the wedding guests (Matt 21:2-14):

2 The kingdom of heaven is comparable to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. 3 And he sent out his servants (δοῦλοι) to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. 4 Again he sent out other servants (δοῦλοι) saying, Tell those who have been invited, Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are butchered and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast! 5 But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, 6 and the rest seized his servants (δοῦλοι) and mistreated them and killed them. 7 But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies (στράτευμα) and destroyed those murderers (φονεῦς) and set their city on fire. 8 Then he said to his servants (δοῦλοι), The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding feast. 10 Those servants (δοῦλοι) went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good. And the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests.⁴¹

The message of this parable is that the Jewish leaders have rejected the invitation of God's servants, the Old Testament prophets up to and including John the Baptist, to enter the Messianic kingdom. In fact, they have murdered God's servants! As a result, God will send the Roman

³⁹ "...[Jesus] said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. 38 Therefore request the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest." (Matt 9:37-38, author's translation).

⁴⁰ The Twelve will rule over Israel in the Messianic kingdom (Matt 19:28).

⁴¹ Author's translation, loosely based on the NASB. The remainder of the parable is not pertinent to the discussion of this paper.

armies to destroy the Jewish leaders and the city of Jerusalem.⁴² God will send a new set of servants, the New Testament μαθηταὶ, to the main highways to invite all they find—Jews and Gentiles, evil and good. The Messianic kingdom will be filled with these individuals. It is the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament μαθηταὶ who are the king's servants (δοῦλοι). These servants are distinguished from the evil and good people who accept the servants' invitation. This is the distinction Matthew makes throughout his gospel. The μαθηταὶ are God's δοῦλοι who invite people into the Messianic kingdom. In many ways they resemble the Old Testament δοῦλοι, the prophets.⁴³ The ὄχλοι, by contrast, are those who accept God's invitation, through the μαθηταὶ, to enter the Messianic kingdom. Thus the distinction between μαθηταὶ and ὄχλοι is maintained. The ὄχλοι enter the Messianic kingdom by accepting the message of the μαθηταὶ, not by becoming μαθηταὶ, which is a totally separate and distinct issue.

The message of the three parables together is: (1) the ὄχλοι are entering the Messianic kingdom through faith in Messiah Jesus, while the Jewish leaders are not; (2) Jesus' μαθηταὶ are replacing the Jewish leaders as leaders of the ὄχλοι; and (3) the Jewish leaders and their city will be destroyed, while the μαθηταὶ will gather a motley crew of evil and good people into the Messianic kingdom.

The Contrast between the Jewish Leaders and the ὄχλοι

To reinforce the primary argument of this paper that Matthew portrays the ὄχλοι as a group of individuals who are distinct from the μαθηταὶ but who are nevertheless entering the

⁴² This occurs in A.D. 70.

⁴³ Jesus compares the μαθηταὶ to προφῆται early in the book of Matthew (Matt 5:12).
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Messianic kingdom, it is crucial to observe the consistent contrast between the response of the Jewish leaders to Jesus, and the response of the ὄχλοι to Jesus. This is a theme that begins in Matt 2, where the wise men (μάγοι) from the East, representing the Gentile ὄχλοι, respond very favorably to the birth of Jesus (Matt 2:1-2), while Herod, the Jewish leaders, and all of Jerusalem do not (Matt 2:3). The theme is continued with John, who readily baptizes the ὄχλοι (Matt 3:5-6), but sternly warns the Jewish leaders who are coming for baptism (Matt 3:7-12).

The climax of this theme comes in Matt 21-23. In Matt 21:6-11, Matthew relates:

6 The μαθηταὶ went and did just as Jesus had instructed them, 7 and they brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their coats on them. And he sat on the coats. 8 Most of the ὄχλος spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road. 9 The ὄχλοι going ahead of him, and those who followed, were shouting, Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest! 10 When he had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, Who is this? 11 And the ὄχλοι were saying, This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.⁴⁴

This scene directly contrasts with Jesus pronouncement against Jerusalem in Matt 23:37-39:

37 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. 38 Look, your house is being left to you desolate! 39 For I say to you, from now on you will not see me until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!⁴⁵

Four crucial observations come from a comparison of these two passages. First, Matthew clearly views the μαθηταὶ and the ὄχλοι as two distinct groups, yet both of these groups are on Jesus' side. Second, through their words and actions, the ὄχλοι clearly demonstrate their belief that

⁴⁴ Author's translation, loosely based on the NASB.

⁴⁵ Author's translation, loosely based on the NASB.

Jesus is the Messianic prophet-king. Third, the ὄχλοι consist of people entirely distinct from “all the city,” that is, the residents of the city of Jerusalem. The ὄχλοι of Matt 21:6-11 consist of believers in Messiah Jesus who are entering into Jerusalem with him, not residents of Jerusalem who have been (Matt 2:3) and continue to be (Matt 26:47, 55; 27:20) under the sway of the Jewish leaders. This explains the makeup of the ὄχλοι in Matt 26-27. The individuals who make up the ὄχλοι in Matt 4-25 are almost certainly a group of people different from the ὄχλοι who come out to arrest Jesus (Matt 26:47, 55) and who demand the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus (Matt 27:20).⁴⁶ Fourth, the words of the ὄχλοι are the exact words the Jewish leaders must say before they see Jesus at his second coming. The Jewish leaders must change their viewpoint about Jesus and receive him as the Messiah, just as the ὄχλοι entering Jerusalem have already done.

The previous discussion, then, leads to two very important conclusions. First, the ὄχλοι, particularly the ὄχλοι coming into Jerusalem, are viewed by Matthew as a group of individuals who believe in Messiah Jesus. They have done what they need to do to enter the Messianic kingdom. It is not necessary for them to be μαθηται to enter the Messianic kingdom. So whatever being a μαθητής means, it is not equivalent to justification for eternal life, as Paul and John might phrase it. Nor is it accurate to say that every member of the ὄχλοι is by default a μαθητής or is called to be a μαθητής, as many argue today.

Second, for Matthew, being a μαθητής means being a fisher of people, a shepherd of sheep, a harvest-worker, and a servant-slave of Jesus. This makes discipleship, at least for

⁴⁶ In other words, not all of Matthew’s ὄχλοι are created equal. The ὄχλοι from outside Jerusalem are generally good. The ὄχλοι from inside Jerusalem are generally evil.

Matthew, a church leadership concept more than a sanctification concept. All members of the ὄχλοι of believers are saints who are called to spiritual maturity. Every member of the ὄχλοι of believers, for example, is called to observe the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, as indicated by the Great Commission: “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt 28:20). However, not all saints are called to be church leaders who lead, proclaim, and teach. Just as there are New Testament epistles addressed to entire churches, and also New Testament epistles addressed to church leaders (the pastoral epistles), so there are gospels addressed to all believers (Mark, John) and gospels addressed to church leaders (Matthew). Just as 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are pastoral epistles, so Matthew is a pastoral gospel.⁴⁷ Of course, while not all believers are church leaders, all believers may gain spiritual insight from the pastoral epistles. The same is true of Matthew’s gospel.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ In fact, many of Jesus’ lessons to the the μαθηται in Matthew are repeated by Paul to Timothy and Titus in the pastoral epistles.

⁴⁸ For many today, the term “discipleship” has become a synonym for “sanctification.” This has caused a lack of focus on leadership development within the church, with harmful results. A more accurate understanding of Matthean discipleship will hopefully sharpen the focus of the church in the direction of leadership development, which is very much lacking in the church today.

Implications

Soteriology

In the area of soteriology, the view of John MacArthur that one must be a μαθητής in order to be justified must be entirely rejected. This is certainly not the view of Matthew. Justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Messiah Jesus alone, not by following Jesus as a μαθητής. MacArthur severely misunderstands the distinction Matthew makes between the ὄχλοι and the μαθηταὶ, and between the ὄχλοι outside of Jerusalem and the ὄχλοι in Jerusalem. The distinction between the ὄχλοι and the μαθηταὶ is not a soteriological one but an ecclesiological one. Not every believer is designed to be a μαθητής, that is, a church leader.⁴⁹ Moreover, the only issue for unbelievers is faith alone in Messiah Jesus alone, not whether to become a church leader. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were called by Jesus to become μαθηταὶ weeks and perhaps months after they had believed in Jesus as Messiah (John 1:35-51; 2:11). So the decision to believe in Messiah Jesus for justification is entirely distinct from the decision to become a church leader.⁵⁰ The bottom line is that we must not add to the faith alone in Messiah Jesus alone gospel. It is totally erroneous to require unbelievers to attain to a standard that is intended for church leaders.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Eph 4:11-13.

⁵⁰ Passages that emphasize restricting the number of church leaders (1 Tim 3:1-13; 5:17-22; Tit 1:5-9; Jas 3:1) and stricter judgment for church leaders (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Cor 3:8-10; 2 Tim 4:6-8; Jas 3:1) are relevant here.

⁵¹ "...[N]o confusing intrusion into the doctrine that salvation is conditioned alone upon believing is more effective than the added demand that the unsaved must dedicate themselves to do God's will in their daily life, as well as to believe upon Christ. The desirability of a dedication to God on the part of every believer is obvious, and is so stressed in the Sacred Text that many sincere people who are inattentive to doctrine are easily led to suppose that this same dedication, which is *voluntary* in the case of the believer, is *imperative* in the case of the unsaved." Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 3:384-385.

Sanctification

As far as Matthew's gospel is concerned, advancing as a believer to spiritual maturity is not synonymous with being a μαθητής. Of course, all church leaders (μαθηται) are expected to be further along in the sanctification process than those they are leading. That's what qualifies them to be fishers of people, shepherds of sheep, harvest-workers, and servant-slaves. But as several scenes and parables show in Matthew, discipleship is much more of a church leadership concept than a general sanctification concept. With relation to the Jewish people and the Messianic kingdom, the μαθηται are very similar to Old Testament prophets. Like Jesus and John, they call the Jewish people to change their minds and believe in Messiah Jesus in order to enter the Messianic kingdom. They are called to teach what they have learned from Jesus, summed up in the Sermon on the Mount, to the ὄχλοι of believers, that the ὄχλοι may advance to spiritual maturity.⁵² In other words, the principles of the Sermon on the Mount are for all believers; it is the job of the μαθηται to teach and lead the ὄχλοι of believers in the application of those principles.

Once it is seen that the Jewish leaders will reject Jesus as the Messiah, the μαθηται are then trained by Jesus as the future leaders of the church.⁵³ As shown above, the feedings of the five thousand and four thousand provide a paradigm for the church age. The μαθηται, as church leaders, are to take what they have received from Jesus and distribute it to the ὄχλοι of believers, so that the ὄχλοι may become full of Jesus' teaching and example. The goal is not that all members of the ὄχλοι become church leaders (μαθηται) but that all members of the ὄχλοι get fed.

⁵² Cf. Eph 4:11-13.

⁵³ The fourth discourse of Matthew (Matt 18:1-35) is particularly directed toward the church age.
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The ὄχλοι getting fed is an image of sanctification. The μαθηταὶ distributing food to the ὄχλοι is an image of church leadership. The conclusion is that sanctification is for all believers, even for those who do not become church leaders, that is, μαθηταὶ.⁵⁴

Ecclesiology

In the area of ecclesiology, the Matthean view of discipleship needs to be taken more seriously by church leaders. First, church leaders need to meet the strict requirements of discipleship. My personal belief is that church leadership in the United States is failing. Church leaders many times are not bold evangelists and brave defenders of the faith. They are not following Jesus wholeheartedly (Matt 8:19), with the attitude of letting the dead bury their own dead (Matt 8:22). They are not taking their crosses and following after Jesus (Matt 10:38). Many church leaders seem to have found their life in this world; they have not lost their lives for Jesus' sake (Matt 10:39). The church in the West is failing not because of the apathy and indifference of believers in general but because of the apathy and indifference of church leaders.⁵⁵ By correctly viewing Matthean discipleship as a church leadership concept, we may refocus ourselves on the importance of biblical church leadership. The μαθηταὶ of the church—its elders, pastors, teachers, and evangelists—are the ones who receive the majority of the attention in Matthew. It is for them in particular to carry their crosses and lay down their lives. When church leaders do this, the church will succeed.

⁵⁴ Luke may have a different view of discipleship, one that is very much worth considering. This paper, however, focuses on Matthew's view of discipleship.

⁵⁵ We cheapen the concept of discipleship when we equate discipleship with sanctification or when we assume every believer is a de facto disciple. That's grade inflation. It is like handing out an "A" to someone and patting them on the back when they are not even enrolled in the school! It is very likely that our Western love for egalitarian democracy has distorted our view of biblical discipleship.

Second, current church leaders should devote more effort, energy and time to developing the next generation of church leaders. Around the world, crowds of believers need leadership. Those leaders are the μαθηταί. Just as Jesus devoted a significant amount of time to training his μαθηταί, so current church leaders should devote a significant amount of time to training μαθηταί. This training must be personal and not outsourced to a seminary or Bible college. A seminary degree does not a μαθητής make. Much personal effort, energy, and time is needed to make fishers of people, shepherds of sheep, harvest-workers, and servant-slaves of Jesus.⁵⁶ This is the type of church leader needed by the church in this and every generation.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to prove two points. First, up to Matthew 26, the term ὄχλος (pl. ὄχλοι) generally describes a group of people that believes in Messiah Jesus. They have done what they need to do to enter the Messianic kingdom, in sharp contrast to the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people generally (λαός) who reject Jesus. Second, the μαθηταί are fishers of people, shepherds of sheep, harvest-workers, and servant-slaves who Jesus trains to lead the ὄχλοι of believers, both during his first coming and afterwards in the church age. Few members of the ὄχλοι of believers are called by Jesus to be μαθηταί, and the standard for being a μαθηταί is very high. While all members of the ὄχλοι of believers are called to obey the principles of the Sermon on the Mount (sanctification), relatively few are called to be church leaders (μαθηταί). The most important implications from these two conclusions are in the areas of soteriology and

⁵⁶ This is the basic argument of Robert E. Coleman in his book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, abridged 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

ecclesiology. In the area of soteriology, Matthew's distinction between the ὄχλοι of believers and the μαθηταὶ shows that justification through faith alone in Messiah Jesus alone is a totally separate issue from being a μαθηταὶ. In the area of ecclesiology, the high standard of discipleship in Matthew becomes the litmus test for church leadership in every generation, including our own. In other words, we need to raise the bar when it comes to church leadership. The health of the church in our generation depends on it.

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