
MATTHEW AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

How can leaders engage a biblical text—in this case the Gospel of Matthew—in a manner that provides insights into that text and into our own contexts? Because one key element of leadership is the work of shaping learning communities, contemporary theories regarding that work provide lenses that can help us (a) see Matthew's text afresh, (b) gain insight into our own contexts, and (c) work with those new insights. So these texts (the Gospel of Matthew, two contexts in the first century, the texts of contemporary theories, and our own contexts) can nurture and fund our own capacities for shaping learning communities. That learning, as noted in Matthew and in the theories, implies changes in beliefs and practices.

Theories, Contexts, and Texts

A key task of leadership is the work of shaping learning communities. Learning is not only about information; it includes the shaping of group desires, convictions, and actions. I am fronting a definition of leadership as the work of creating and nurturing environments and providing resources so a people are able to engage their most important challenges and participate in the promising and powerful activities of God. This leadership work is about processes and content. Also, it should be noted, this kind of learning often requires unlearning; it involves sustained personal and group reflection; it does not happen without risk.

This is a query in the discipline of practical theology;¹ I assume that readers bring experience to this conversation as

¹ As used here, practical theology is a method for engaging texts and contexts, so that a group can better discern God's actions and how they might participate. It requires resources from our faith traditions and the gifts of our own cultures and times. See Ray Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*

we engage cultural resources (leadership and learning communities) and a biblical text (some chapters of Matthew) in order to fund new imagination and experiments. My engagement with the Gospel of Matthew² looks at two specific communities—the community of learners surrounding Jesus and the community of believers in Antioch at the time of Matthew’s writing.³

Initially I will work with Kenneth Gergen regarding social construction, Paulo Freire regarding a pedagogy of praxis as action-reflection by subject-agents, Peter Senge concerning learning organizations, and Ronald Heifetz on the theme of holding environments. By noting overlap and benefitting from various nuances, I will then name some noteworthy subtopics along with three primary lenses for this project. As I outline these frameworks, I will draw attention to particular situations in Christian organizations, especially congregations that seem to be suitable for these perspectives.

In order to provide a more focused way to explore these matters, I will often refer to missional perspectives that impinge on ecclesiology.⁴ This framework assumes that the

(Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001); Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1999); Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008); Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martínez, “A Practical Theology of Leadership With International Voices,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10(2) (2011): 27–57.

² Even though the name Matthew is not affixed to this gospel prior to late in the second century C.E., I will use that as the name of the author because of convention. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

³ I am assuming some academic approaches such as narrative, audience, and redaction criticism while not engaging details regarding those methods. The various commentaries I note work with their own mixed methods. With Carter, I believe that much about the audience is “assumed by the text but not made explicit in it.” See Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2001), 5.

⁴ In recent decades, numerous churches, researchers, and authors have been exploring the need for a more conscious and deliberate engagement by congregations in God’s mission. This shift, as I see it, is not about adding programmatic activities, or reemphasizing evangelism and/or social justice, or planting more churches. At the heart of the missional reorientation is God’s

role of churches is to discern God's presence and initiatives and priorities in a context, and to experiment their way into collaboration (especially in relationship with those who are "other"). This requires leadership activities that shape environments, practices, relational connections, and participatory opportunities that make such discernment and involvement more likely. Where it seems illuminating, I will refer to missional life as a way to understand more fully the nature of learning communities as this exploration of the Gospel of Matthew unfolds.

My hope is that by reading Matthew with contemporary lenses shaped by those who give priority to learning communities that we might (a) see Matthew's text afresh, (b) gain insight into our own contexts, and (c) work with new insights. So these texts (the Gospel of Matthew, two contexts in the first century, and the texts of contemporary theories) will nurture and fund our own capacities for shaping learning communities.⁵

Contemporary Frameworks for Learning Communities

Gergen and Social Construction

According to social construction,⁶ we live in a world that is constructed by communities and their communication.⁷

Kenneth Gergen writes, "We may say that as we

agency and invitation—that the reign of God is present and God's love is engaging the world in particular, concrete lives and communities—and churches as groups and individuals are invited into those initiatives. Among authors cited in this conversation, see Lesslie Newbigin, Darrell Guder, Alan Roxburgh, Craig Van Gelder, and Dwight Zscheile.

⁵ Several colleagues provided valuable suggestions and conversations, especially Susan Maros, Carson Reed, Love Sechrist, and Tommy Givens.

⁶ Kenneth J. Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009); see also Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1967).

⁷ Regarding other perspectives that ask about what is real, Gergen explains, "constructionism doesn't try to rule on what is or is not fundamentally real. Whatever is, simply is. However, the moment we begin to articulate what there is—what is truly or objectively the case—we enter a world of discourse, and thus a tradition.... Even to ask whether there is a real world 'out there' is already to presume the Western view of the person, with a subjective world 'inside' the head and an 'objective' world somewhere outside." Gergen, 161.

communicate with each other we construct the world in which we live.”⁸ Social construction is about how we live in the world, and toward what ends.⁹ The vocabulary is shaped as it is used in relationships, and it is sustained if a group finds that a world so described is useful. Our conversations and our thinking take place in the midst of words and their meanings, metaphors, narratives, and the grammar that shapes connections.¹⁰ Social construction highlights the importance of collaboration, of personal and conversational reflection, and of experiments toward learning.¹¹ It demonstrates the importance of naming perspectives and makes possible new imagination.

Participants in churches live inside a world that is made by the language that has been developed at the intersection of societal frameworks, sacred texts, and the historical development of traditions. Our conversations and actions regarding church life are shaped by social realities (languages and their constructs), such as consumer capitalism, personal preference, romantic idealism, commercial corporations, therapeutic frameworks, niche identities, migration and ethnicity, democratic protocols, and the entertainment industries.¹² For example, language about “going to church” incorporates the meaning of church as a place or a

⁸ Gergen, 4.

⁹ The literature, arguments, and varieties of explanations are vast, so I will work with Gergen’s five assumptions: “The way in which we understand the world is not required by ‘what there is’”; “The ways in which we describe and explain the world are the outcomes of relationships”; “Constructions gain their significance from their social utility”; “As we describe and explain, so do we fashion our future”; “Reflection on our taken-for-granted worlds is vital to our future well-being.” Gergen, 5–13.

¹⁰ Gergen, 32–43.

¹¹ Gergen, 124–24.

¹² Alan Roxburgh writes “beside, or beneath, our public declarations and theological confessions about the nature of the church, there lies a wholly different imagination about who we are and how we act in the world.... [S]ome call this a ‘social imaginary’ while others use the phrase ‘language house.’” He emphasizes that we are shaped by particular social constructs “that are largely out of our sight, even while we are articulating another set of beliefs.” Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2011), 57, 61.

gathering/event with the belief that participation happens when someone travels from elsewhere to the location where church is. Even though teachings in many traditions seek to emphasize that *church* refers to people no matter where they are, “going to church” remains an understood and common expression regarding reality.¹³

I believe that social construction gives us a way to better understand Jesus with his group of disciples and Matthew with his Antiochean church. Jesus and Matthew are engaging the way language is used—how the social constructs of early Judaism and imperial Rome are being challenged by the alternative presented by the presence and articulation of the gospel. This is related to contemporary matters of leadership in light of challenges that churches face concerning social contexts, ecclesial life, and participation in God’s mission.

Freire’s Pedagogy

While some kinds of learning can occur through books and lectures, most significant change takes place in the pedagogical cycle of what Paulo Freire called action-reflection. Freire, a Brazilian educator, noted the inadequacy of *banking* education in which information is deposited from the teacher to the student. Drawing on Aristotle’s concept of praxis, Freire saw the need for learners to be fully involved in activities that were directly related to the situation and information in play. He wanted learners to reflect on their own lives and contexts (rather than on disembodied ideas) and as a group engage in such reflective work that they could consider and experiment with proffered new information.¹⁴ His proposal was developed in the context of

¹³ Similarly, at least in the West, “mission” has emphasized (a) excursions by specialists to other lands or to challenging social settings, (b) local programs developed by church experts that on occasion require others to provide money or some volunteer time, or (c) short-term trips for youth or adults that focus on helping some who are needy while enhancing personal discipleship. This conversation is being reframed by those who prioritize God’s missional agency and the vocation of all churches to discern and participate in that mission as it is already on the ground in their contexts.

¹⁴ Much of Freire’s work was in the context of a military dictatorship in Brazil, and the vocabulary of oppression and liberation was especially useful.

adult education,¹⁵ in which he demonstrated that men and women did not just need to gain literacy that perpetuated their oppressed situation; rather reflection on their lives would raise questions as vocabulary increased their capacities to understand and challenge the cultural forces that sapped life.¹⁶

Even though a person might believe he or she has some level of personal choice and agency, frequently, Freire observes, “what happens to a greater or lesser degree in the various ‘worlds’ into which the world is divided is that the ordinary person is crushed, diminished, converted into a spectator, maneuvered by myths which powerful social forces have created.”¹⁷ A leader provides education—an environment plus activities—that can genuinely bring critical resources, through an action-reflection process, and increase the capacities of participants to be subjects rather than objects.

Church practices frequently objectify members and neighbors in late modern society. The modern forces of functional rationalism and consumer marketing (which is rooted in rationalized strategies and romanticism) are intentionally and blindly adopted in churches. Like modern corporations, churches offer goods and services (programs, ideas, food, self-help activities, social life) that are predetermined.¹⁸ This counters Christian anthropology,

He insists that real learning takes place only when the learners are not just acted upon: “It is absolutely essential that the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as Subjects of the transformation.” Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1970), 121.

¹⁵ See Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury, 1974).

¹⁶ Freire’s work is engaged by Christian educators, including Groome, 54, 179; and Robert Pazmiño, *Latin American Journey: Insights for Christian Education in North America* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2002), chap. 2.

¹⁷ Freire, *Education*, 6.

¹⁸ Alan Roxburgh notes that by definition, strategic planning objectifies people; they are pieces in a plan. Alan Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), chap. 4.

which insists that humans are subjects-agents.¹⁹ As agents, members of a church and the neighbors they live among are to become learners in action-reflection sequences. This action-reflection cycle can be identified in the Gospel of Matthew. Frequently indications show that Jesus and Matthew respect their immediate learning circles by giving them resources for learning in order to make it increasingly likely that they more fully understand their own agency in the context of God's love, presence, and call.

Senge on Learning Organizations

In a well-respected book titled *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge proposes disciplines that contribute to the shaping of a learning organization: "The 'stake' I wanted to put into the ground would establish systems thinking, mental models, personal mastery, shared vision, and team learning and dialogue as inescapable elements in building learning organizations."²⁰ This list begins to establish the barriers to learning (the lack of any one of these elements) and the needed new habits. Organizations have habits in symbiosis with the individuals who are in and around those organizations and the societies and cultures in which they are embedded. Those organizational habits include the ways groups and individuals think, feel, imagine, and act. Neither individuals nor organizations are prone to change such habits easily, so the learning process is layered and multifaceted. Concerning contemporary challenges, Senge writes, "The primary institutions of our society are oriented predominantly toward controlling rather than learning,"²¹

¹⁹ For recent theological work on Christian anthropology, see Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Creation and Humanity: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), esp. chaps. 11 and 13; see also (regarding recent shifts as noted by missiologists) Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), chap. 1.

²⁰ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), x.

²¹ Peter Senge, "The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organizations," *Sloan Management Review* 32(1) (1990): 7.

and that trait is embedded in churches and Christian organizations.²²

All five disciplines, Senge writes, “are concerned with a shift of mind from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future.”²³ While all five disciplines are relevant for learning communities, I will note the importance of systems thinking and team learning, while also merging Senge’s attention to mental models with the earlier framework of social construction.

Churches in North America have varying perspectives on their agency and identity, and descriptions about success, challenges, and futures are all embedded in the habits of late modern society. Success is often defined by various measures of numbers, money, strategic targets, organizational viability, and marketing efforts. While Senge is working without reference to God who is an acting subject, I am focused on God’s agency in this process—and that gives priority to teams that become freed from the hegemony of closed systems in order to walk and imagine and improvise their way into being engaged in God’s active love in their contexts.

Heifetz and Linsky on Holding Environments

Another resource for exploring learning communities is the work of Ronald Heifetz and his colleague Marty Linsky on holding environments.²⁴ Heifetz writes, “The holding

²² See Alan J. Roxburgh, *Structured for Mission: Renewing the Culture of the Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2015); and Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2007).

²³ Senge, 69.

²⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 103–113; Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002); they note their debt to D. W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965).

environment can generate adaptive work because it contains and regulates the stresses that work generates.”²⁵

So a learning community needs a holding environment when the dissonance, challenges, competing perspectives, and (simmering or open) conflicts are present. Heifetz and Linsky write, “We all learn—and are sometimes transformed—by encountering differences that challenge our own experience and assumptions.”²⁶ The idea here is to help a group push into the hard work while maintaining “enough cohesion to offset the centrifugal forces.”²⁷

In the midst of dissonance, in an environment that features safety as well as challenge, participants will experience varying levels of heat, and the leader can exercise some control over that variable. If the temperature is too low, existing habits are given too much space and the motivation to bear the costs of learning will dissipate. Sometimes heat can trigger the capacities for needed work and focus the group. If the temperature is too high, fear and avoidance will dominate and the group becomes immobilized; the threat of change is so intense that the learning community cannot function. This is when the leader needs to lower the temperature.

In North American situations where churches have become disconnected from their neighbors and contexts (with the possible exceptions of programmed, managed operations), a holding environment can make space for adaptive work, such as team learning, action-reflection, and social construction. Too frequently, churches seek solutions that avoid tensions, minimize the extent of change, and in general keep the temperature low. This is even captured in the professional mantra about the pastor as “a non-anxious presence” that prioritizes an affective demeanor over capacities for naming challenges. As Heifetz and Linsky

²⁵ A holding environment is a necessary element for the work that he calls adaptive change—meeting those challenges that are essential for an organization to meet if its purpose is to be realized, but for which goals and means are far from obvious. Heifetz, 105.

²⁶ Heifetz and Linsky, 101.

²⁷ Heifetz and Linsky, 102.

note, conflicts and challenges need to be surfaced, and the work needs to be given to the participants. To do this, leaders use situations (experiences, work) and reflection (dialogue, teaching, imagination) to shape enough safety and enough challenge for learning to occur.

Theories and Key Lenses

The four theoretical areas that I have summarized are noted in Table 1. So far I have indicated possible ways that these frameworks can serve contemporary churches, especially in regard to the current conversations about missional ecclesiology.

Social Construction (Kenneth Gergen)	Pedagogy (Paulo Freire)
Learning Organizations (Peter Senge)	Holding Environments (Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky)

Table 1: Four Theoretical Areas

Several assumptions behind this project parallel elements of these theories. At times I will refer to these assumptions: (1) Learning happens in groups; it is a social activity. (2) Humans are subjects-agents (rather than objects).²⁸ (3) Learning and change take place in the context of complex interface of numerous forces, relationships, and behaviors (systems).²⁹ Three other theoretical areas will be my primary lenses: social construction, action-reflection, and controlling

²⁸ This also connects with Heifetz and Linsky’s call for giving the work “back to the people”; Heifetz and Linsky, 123–39; Heifetz and Donald Laurie also emphasize the importance of “voices from below”; Ronald Heifetz and Donald Laurie, “The Word of Leadership,” *Harvard Business Review* 75(1) (1997): 129–30.

²⁹ I favor general systems theory over family systems. The former is more akin to open systems and ecologies; the later tends to focus on emotional ties in a family unit (which is often viewed as a closed system); see Ervin Laszlo, *The Systems View of the World: A Holistic Vision for Our Time* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton, 1996).

the temperature. Here are links among the primary theorists and these frameworks (Table 2):

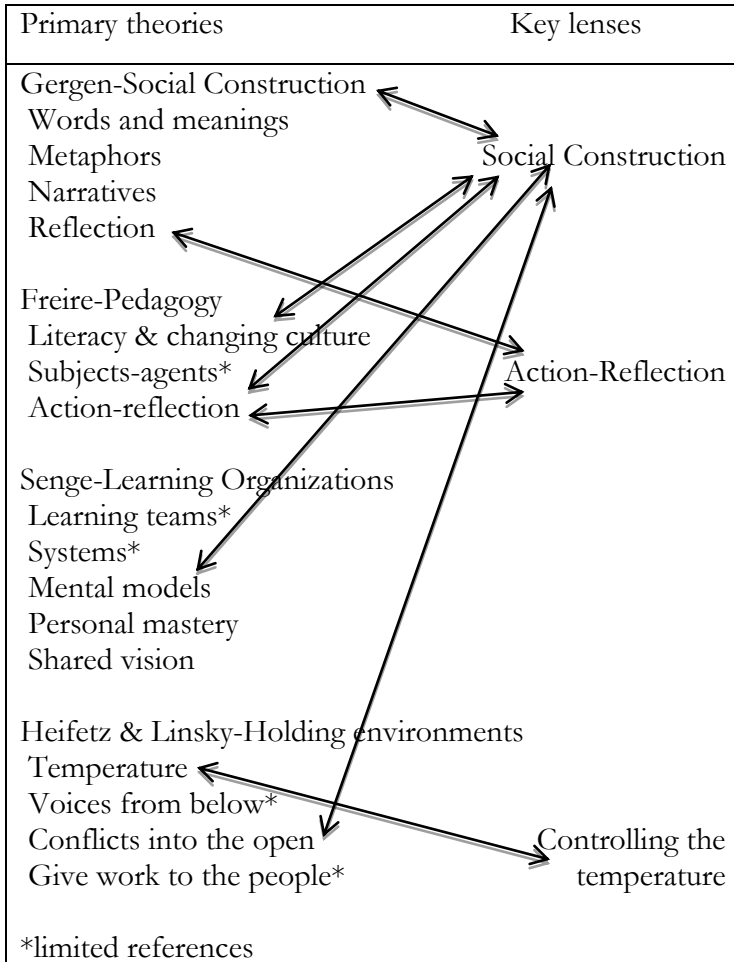


Table 2: Primary Lenses

Communities in Matthew

In any process of community learning, several basic elements need to be specified, including context, participating subjects, and telos. First, regarding the context of the learning communities relevant to this study of Matthew, I will attend to Palestine during the years of Jesus’

life and ministry, and Antioch, Syria, after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E.³⁰ Second, the participants in these learning communities are subjects, in that their own agency is apparent: the growing group of disciples in Matthew (and those who are listening in but not joining) and the church in Antioch (and the significant number of refugees fleeing Titus's troops).³¹ Third, the telos of the learning, or the imagination and purpose of the leader, is crucial, even though it is frequently noted that Matthew's authorial intent cannot be detailed with any certainty. I will work with the assumption that the community learning that Jesus pursues with the disciples and that Matthew pursues with the Antioch church can be substantially discerned.

So the focus will be on Jesus and the disciples (a group that is sometimes numbered but also includes of a wider circle) while also looking at how Matthew is seeking to shape the Antiochean Christian communities for whom he is composing his book. This approach requires some initial background on this gospel regarding its sociocultural setting and the priorities of the author.

The Contexts of Matthew's Learning Communities

The context of Jesus' ministry is known through the gospel writers and other sources. Israel was a widely dispersed people and occupied in its adopted homeland under the imperial rule of the Roman Empire. Israel had a certain amount of religious and social freedom as a trade-off

³⁰ Among proposed audiences for Matthew, Syria has strong backing, and with his usual caution Luz notes "Antioch is not the worst of hypotheses." Ulrich Luz, *Matt. 1–7*, trans. Wilhelm Linn (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 92; Luz prefers a date not "long after" 80 A.D. (Luz, *Matt. 1–7*, 93); See also Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2001), 36–7; Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001), 16, 143–7; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew: Vol. 1* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 143–7. I also want to note that scholars, including some that I cite, prefer working with the gospels in a way that assumes less concerning a specific located audience; I believe that much of what I present remains valuable without the Antiochean context that I specify.

³¹ David Sims, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 191.

for compliance in matters of politics, trade routes, taxes, and commodities. Under Augustus, Herod's realm (d. 4 B.C.) rivaled David's and Solomon's.³² Upon his death, the realm was divided among his sons. Archelaus was appointed over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea, but his brutality led to a quick dismissal and the subsequent rule by prefects in those regions, including Pilate during Jesus' ministry. Antipas's tetrarchy included Galilee and Perea, and Philip ruled to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee, so they became players in the gospel narratives.

Some scholars argue that this situation of Roman occupation led Jews in Israel to understand their condition as one of exile (paralleling earlier captivity in Babylon).³³ This sense of exile—including the continued diaspora, the vassal relationship with Rome, the subsequent limitations on self-rule, and the related compromises concerning the temple and the priesthood—shaped the identity and consciousness of the Jews. This is related to their concepts of sin and other topics that Jesus (and Matthew) engage. For example, N. T. Wright engages a major theme: “The most natural meaning of the phrase ‘The forgiveness of sins’ to a first-century Jew is not in the first instance the remission of individual sins, but the putting away of the whole nation’s sins. And, since the exile was the punishment for those sins, the only sure sign that the sins had been forgiven would be the clear and certain liberation from exile.”³⁴ This perspective is noticed in the ongoing discussions that Jesus has with his followers; they repeat this framework right up to the day of Jesus’ Ascension.³⁵

The numerous Jewish approaches to being a client state included collaboration, minimal cooperation, withdrawal, and uprisings. The Hebrew Scriptures, always present in

³² Everett Ferguson, “The Herodian Dynasty,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, eds. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2013), 64.

³³ See Nicholas Perrin, “Exile,” in Green and McDonald, chap. 3.

³⁴ N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 273; see also Perrin, 26–9.

³⁵ Acts 1.

Jesus' teachings and Matthew's writing, shaped imaginations and language/meanings.³⁶ So, for many, a persistent hope stemmed from God's intervention. Jesus is constantly negotiating such expectations—and Matthew seeks to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of these Hebrew Scripture trajectories while also not necessarily meeting the nationalist expectations of the people. This is one way in which Jesus is shaping disciples to learn of God's presence, kingdom, and future; his teaching aims to make sense of the particular time and place of first-century Israel.

Concerning Matthew's context, while some recent commentators propose Galilean cities like Sepphoris or Tiberius, I agree with a substantial number of Bible scholars that Matthew had been resident in and was writing to Christians in Antioch, Syria.³⁷ Antioch was the third-largest city of the Roman Empire, likely with more than 200,000 residents³⁸ and shaped by the presence of governing Roman systems, trade, military forces, and the diverse populations that were formed by local as well as larger factors.³⁹ Over the centuries, Jews had received varied treatment in Antioch, from favored to persecuted.⁴⁰

In summary, I will assume that Matthew wrote in the late A.D. 70s or early A.D. 80s to an audience that inhabits Antioch, a major city under the reign of imperial Rome, after

³⁶ This is especially true in connection with the book of Daniel.

³⁷ See footnote 29.

³⁸ Mark Wilson, "Syria, Cilicia, and Cyprus," in Green and McDonald, 492–4; see also F. W. Norris, "Antioch of Syria," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 265–9.

³⁹ In noting the likelihood of Antioch as Matthew's context, Craig Keener writes, "I would prefer an urban center in Syro-Palestine that spoke Greek, included a sizeable Jewish community residentially segregated from Gentiles, probably remained bitter against the Romans for recent massacres of 66–70, and remained in touch with rising currents in Judea. Although any proposal ultimately remains a guess, a community in Antioch appears more likely than the alternatives if, despite its heritage in the Gentile mission, it has recently shifted toward embracing more conservative Jewish-Christian traditions in the wake of the bitter Jewish-Roman War of 66–73." Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 42.

⁴⁰ Wilson, 492–4.

the destruction of Jerusalem, just as the Christians are working on their core narratives, practices, and beliefs.

The Subjects in Matthew's Writing

These two named contexts (the time and place of Jesus' ministry and the time and place of Matthew's writing) are populated by diverse persons who are objects of the contextual forces while also subjects (to varying amounts) of their own lives. While some metaphors in Matthew's gospel underplay either audience as active subjects (such as being sheep in Matthew 9:36 and 10:6 or seeds in Matthew 13), the force of the text is that people are agents of their dispositions, learning, and activities. Jesus displays differing modes (patient, dismissive, beckoning, blunt, confrontational, or respectful), and with few exceptions the text indicates that he understood that everyone had capacities (and responsibilities) to engage what he was speaking and embodying.

Following the work of Paulo Freire, this framing (hearers as subjects/agents) matters. Jesus is offering his hearers an alternative social construct to other contextual identities. Rome's representatives and the Sanhedrin, the leaders among the frequently divergent Pharisees and Sadducees, and the scribes and soldiers are all on the scene as actors who persuade and coerce. They all perpetuate the worlds in which they live; they see, understand, construct, and relate in ways that fit the worlds to which they have allegiances. In contrast, Jesus provides God's viewpoint and offer.⁴¹ God has made humans as subjects, so in Jesus' words and actions, he is offering to release them from any bondage so that they can, as subjects, give allegiance to God's reign.

Matthew's audience in Antioch is also treated as subjects, which is most explicit in chapter twenty-eight when the learning-acting sequence is to be passed on from the "eleven disciples" to "all nations." We can describe some of

⁴¹ Obviously, other actors claim to represent God, including officials and detractors, representing Jerusalem or Rome.

those he addresses: (1) an established church (Acts 11ff) composed primarily of Gentiles and Hellenist Jews, (2) recently immigrating Hellenist Jews who had previously relocated to Jerusalem, become believers, and had just arrived in the aftermath of Titus's siege, (3) other (non-Hellenist) Jewish believers who were fleeing the violence in Palestine,⁴² and (4) Jewish followers of Jesus who had recently arrived to escape the violence in Palestine. The massive dislocation of those fleeing Titus's legions would have been disorienting not just to those fleeing but also to the Antiochean church, as new arrivals were traumatized and in need, having lost possessions, communities, geographic roots and practices, livelihoods, and (for many) any vision of a future. Through the narratives and teachings, the references to the Hebrew texts and the clarifying comments about contexts and players, Matthew is helping his readers become aware, to gain interpretive capacities, and to be actors in and of the gospel in Antioch. For the Jewish believers in Jesus (and those who are not followers) who have fled the war in Palestine, and the Gentile believers who are just beginning to get a perspective regarding God being king in place of Caesar, Matthew crafts a catechesis that opens their eyes and options.

The Telos of Learning for Matthew

Matthew's gospel emphasizes (1) God is initiating; (2) God's covenant with Israel is fulfilled, clarified, and recast through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; (3) God's initiative is extended beyond an initial priority of Israel to include mission of Jesus through to gentiles; (4) followers are welcome, even begged, to join with God; and (5) the full presence of God's reign will be in the eschaton.⁴³

⁴² All Jews were Hellenized to some extent, but this distinction was still noted in the early decades of the church; see especially Acts 1–8.

⁴³ This list of emphases is intended to be neither complete nor critical; for another helpful summary, see Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson), chap. 17; elsewhere Carter focuses on Matthew's Christology in light of Rome's imperial agenda, Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 57; for another thematic summary see Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 84–7 and *Journal of Religious Leadership*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Fall 2016

So the telos that Matthew frames regarding Jesus and the people around him, and regarding his own audience, is the embodiment and articulation of an alternative social arrangement, offered as a gift, which is actually made present in Jesus but which does not displace challengers until a future time. The “kingdom of the heavens (lit.)” (note the plural, denoting God’s invisible realm)⁴⁴ counters imperial Rome, economic and power collusion with Rome among Jewish elite, and nationalist initiatives among zealots and some leaders in Israel.⁴⁵ These forces, their causes and consequences, need to be seen from God’s point of view—and God’s point of view is also offered so Jesus’ hearers and Matthew’s readers can begin to see how God is already present and active and so participate in God’s ruling presence.⁴⁶

God’s initiative in Jesus is a gift that calls for response. Carter writes, “Of supreme importance is that God’s ‘will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6:10). This is to be the central focus of the human heart, relationships, actions, and social structures.”⁴⁷ Those who respond will shift

for some conclusions concerning Christology, see Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 142–6); for eschatologically shaped morality revealed in Jesus, see John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 262–4. Also concerning the eschaton, Matthew notes it is named by John the Baptist (3:1–10) and present in Jesus (life, death, resurrection) and in the fall of the temple. These do not complete the fulfillment but indicate the shape Matthew sees.

⁴⁴ “Matthew develops a unique usage of the singular and plural forms of οὐρανός: the singular is used to refer to the visible realm (and in the heaven and earth pairs), and the plural refers to the invisible and divine.” See Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2009), 8, 132. Perhaps rather than “invisible,” this kingdom, as it engages earthly kingdoms, does not look like and act like those human kingdoms.

⁴⁵ Pennington, 324–30, 336–48.

⁴⁶ Carter writes, “Here it is suggested that the audience of Matthew’s gospel quickly learns, and is frequently reminded through a variety of conventions, that the author tells the story from God’s point of view. This point of view evaluates all actions, characters, and perspectives.” Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller*, 106.

⁴⁷ Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller*, 232.

identity, allegiances, and lifestyle. The telos is to become embodied in the present; the eschatological advent of Jesus is proleptically present (“I will be with you always”) as God continues to initiate and followers are transformed into worshipping, missional communities. So Jesus and Matthew are providing their audiences with God’s viewpoint so that they can be disrupted, disoriented, and then released from other forces in order to see and believe and embody God’s will.

Reading Matthew as Leaders

The Gospel of Matthew is structured around five major “sermons,” with narratives, briefer words, and other descriptions from Matthew.⁴⁸ I will follow this structure and engage the first four sections (Table 3):

Matthew Outline	
1:1–4:25	Genealogy, birth, escape, John and baptism, temptation, beginning ministry
5:1–7:29	First sermon: Sermon on the Mount
8:1–9:34	Ministry of healing, miracles, conversations
9:35–11:1	Second sermon: Calling and sending the Twelve

Table 3: Matthew Outline

Matthew 1:1–4:25—Genealogy, birth, escape, John and baptism, temptation, beginning ministry

The first section (Matt. 1:1–4:25) offers contextual elements related to the community that is around Jesus. Following the genealogy, we learn that Mary and Joseph are faithful and courageous, Herod is a jealous and violent king, and John the Baptist has drawn followers and enemies, calling the Sadducees and Pharisees “children of snakes” (Matt. 3:7). Jesus identifies himself with John’s message, and

⁴⁸ While this structure is assumed by most commentators, Luz notes the importance of the five discourses for didactic purposes but emphasizes that the overall structure is narrative rather than a composition rooted in a symbolic use of the number five. See Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 44.

then his ministry moves to Capernaum (northern Galilee), where he calls four fishermen to follow him (Matt. 4:18–22). Whatever we are going to come to understand as his ministry, we immediately see that he will do it by forming a learning community. His ministry is described in Matthew 4:23–25:

²³Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues. He announced the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people. ²⁴News about him spread throughout Syria. People brought to him all those who had various kinds of diseases, those in pain, those possessed by demons, those with epilepsy, and those who were paralyzed, and he healed them. ²⁵Large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from the areas beyond the Jordan River. (CEB)

The size of the group and geographic spread of those who want to watch and listen are impressive. This passage notes sickness and demons and narrates Jesus' mercy, thus emphasizing his initiatives concerning the suffering of persons (and their families and social groups). These initial audiences hear a proclamation of "the Kingdom of Heaven," which would stir varied hopes regarding the displacement of Rome's rule (and their collaborators). Social construction emphasizes the language contests, and "kingdom" is a major focus, adding to the earlier dissonance between John and other leaders. Senge's emphasis on systems is especially relevant; Jesus is engaging important layers and interconnections. Empire, temple rulers, economics, hopes for God's intervention (rooted in their Scriptures), and the disruptive grace of healings⁴⁹ are all at

⁴⁹ Healings are part of this mix regarding forgiveness, social relationships, and the presence of the kingdom because bodies and health are intimately tied to politics, oppression, material well-being, justice, work, debt, and the fabric of a community. Jesus is preaching and performing a break in this cycle of broken lives and systems. See Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 123–5; for a larger discussion, see Joel Green, "Healing and Healthcare," in Green and McDonald, chap. 27.

play, along with an awareness of crowds and the energy they display. Jesus is engaging and shaping curiosity and desires as he draws audiences. Jesus' primary learning community, for our purposes, begins to form as four men are called to follow him.

Matthew's Antiochean learning community brings their own recent experiences with them as they read this text (or hear it read). For those with a Jewish heritage, the genealogy is familiar (reminding them of their stories) and disruptive (because it ends with Jesus). This is social construction—the shaping and reshaping of meanings, with an awareness of previous factors that formed these people. Many of them feel the loss of Jewish heritage, so he spells out Jesus' Jewish roots. Just as many of them had recently fled violence caused by Rome, so did Jesus in his family's flight to Egypt to avoid Herod's slaughter.

For non-Jewish readers (and Jews interested in reaching them), the inclusion of Gentiles in the genealogy (four women who are Gentiles or from Gentile contexts, see Matthew 1:5–6)⁵⁰ and the story of the magi (Matt. 2:1–12; possibly from Arabia, Babylon, or Persia⁵¹) show the particular ways that God initiates beyond Jewish ethnicity and nationhood. Also, the magi, as a foil to Herod the Great, provide a quiet but unmistakable counter to Roman imperialism, which would get the attention of Jews fleeing Titus. These stories potentially lower the temperature by making connections and demonstrating empathy. So Matthew is providing the diverse members of his readership some substantive reasons to keep reading.

Matthew 5:1–7:29—First Sermon: Sermon on the Mount

The first sermon (Matt. 5–7) demonstrates earlier frameworks that link social construction with complex systems (linking economics, politics, religion, and daily life in families and towns). In Jesus' crowd, views likely vary regarding the arrangements made with Rome. Some are

⁵⁰ Luz notes the universalist tone of the genealogy; see Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 110.

⁵¹ Davies and Allison, 228.

simply, humbly, waiting with hope for God's future, while others (including the zealots) are provoking rulers in hopes of an uprising. Regarding social construction, Jesus names (and thereby creates) God's grace: those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, are explicitly blessed because God is involved (Matt. 5:3–5). This is counterintuitive. These who are marginalized and without options are favored by God. This reversal of what is obvious gives new identity and agency to those who are receptive listeners.

Throughout the materials that comprise the sermon, Jesus shapes a learning environment in which some hearers would be comforted (the marginalized) and be drawn to hear more (because of the lower temperature). Yet disciples might also have new anxieties when they are made aware that they are called to some new norms that are unfamiliar, such as loving enemies (Matt. 5:43–45) or avoiding judgmental attitudes (Matt. 7:1–7).

The core learning team (specified as “disciples” in Matthew 5:1) is hopefully becoming more available to the perspectives offered by Jesus, and perhaps even a larger number of listeners (specified as “crowd,” see Matthew 5:1 and 7:28) are reconsidering their lives and beliefs. Regarding action-reflection, the sermon does not just call for assent—it provides meanings *and* actions (e.g., “here is what God is like, here is what you can do”), which attends to both reflection and action. Also, some actions that listeners perhaps engaged (judging, showy prayer, accumulating worldly treasures) need to receive attention (reflection) based on Jesus' words, with a movement toward different actions/practices.⁵² Throughout the sermon, Jesus is surfacing language (and meanings) in ways that call for assumptions to be rethought. Being “blessed” is reshaped, morals and piety receive reorientation, metaphors shift assumed meanings, and the construction of what it means to be God's people is put into play.

⁵² See Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 215.

In Antioch, Matthew knows that earlier Jewish immigrants had received a level of favor through citizenship⁵³ while more recent arrivals were marginalized by imperial Rome and urban stratification.⁵⁴ Hegemonic power is visible in the trade route that connects Antioch with the eastern regions of the empire and in the presence of military might (especially with Titus's legions in the area). Many mourn as they flee Rome's victory in Jerusalem. Fear and anxiety might also be present in Antioch's synagogues, where conversations about Christian faith and the mission to Gentiles are likely to take place. So all of the elements of Jesus' interpretive leadership come through in Matthew's writing for Antioch: meanings are being reshaped, actions are needed in connection with meanings, and past actions need to be reconsidered. The text is not about a narrow aspect of life but, rather, engages all the complex elements (systems) of history, law, economics, power, relationships, and the future. In addition, the sermon has the potential for shaping a holding environment as the church (and its neighbors) seeks God in the midst of their recently encumbered urban lives. Matthew knows of suffering, and the beatitudes may lower the temperature as hearers long for God's mercy. Also, while it seems the empire is omnipresent, violent, and unstoppable, Matthew confidently writes about the kingdom of heaven. All of this points to the social construction of the community, which is already about 50 years old as Matthew writes. These words, these metaphors, these announcements are in a context with Imperial Rome (and with the continuing rejection of Jewish leaders). Matthew wants them to ask: Are we in a dependable, sturdy house, or are we making a house that will collapse when under stress (Matt. 7:24–27)? So even with the invitations, his warnings raise the temperature.

⁵³ Samuel L. Adams, *Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 161.

⁵⁴ The social and economic strata are noted by others: Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 30–32; Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 47; Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 17–19.

Matthew 8:1–9:34—Ministry of Healing, Miracles, Conversations

Following the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew provides a section in which Jesus' activities are emphasized along with diverse responses. As previously, healings occur, demons are cast out, and various conversations are engaged. Regarding Freire's emphasis on people as subject-agents plus attention regarding those not usually accepted as players, this narrative sequence is notable for diversity: a centurion, Peter's mother-in-law, citizens of a Gadarene town, Matthew the tax collector and his friends, John the Baptist's disciples, a synagogue leader, and some Pharisees and scribes. They are all witnesses to Jesus' activities and words, and they reflect and respond. This is all happening with Jesus' primary learning team watching and, on occasion, having bit parts. Evidence also points to an inner group of four disciples in Matthew 8:18–22, to which a fifth named Matthew is added as noted here in 9:9.

Regarding social construction, meaning (about faith and faithfulness, about God and being engaged with God) is being constructed in ways that disrupt the accepted and sanctioned norms. The new reality is being constructed primarily around the themes of healing/mercy and authority/power. Regarding the holding environment, the growing inner group no doubt feels the impact of the interaction Jesus has with others around them. They may experience the temperature being raised because Jesus is creating an alternative community. Not only is he extending mercy to Peter's mother-in-law, but also to Matthew's friends (a questionable group), a centurion, a leper, and a hemorrhaging woman. The disciples are able to observe, experience, and reflect on these interactions. Then the disciples are the center of an event on the Sea of Galilee, where a storm causes high anxieties while Jesus sleeps; then when he calms the storm and chastises them for little faith, they are safe but challenged. The text notes their reflections: "What kind of person is this? Even the winds and the lake obey him!" (Matt. 8:27). After the party with Matthew's friends, the disciples are confronted by Pharisees (an

unpleasant experience), but then Jesus' explanation provides new clarity. So through this sequence, the inner circle and many others who are watching are being called into a new reality, one that engages their actions and beliefs.

For Matthew's learners, Antiochean history included miracle stories, which were noted by Paul and Barnabas when they were sent from Antioch to the Jerusalem church due to pressures for Gentiles to become Jewish as part of their faith conversion: "The entire (Jerusalem) assembly fell quiet as they listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God did among the Gentiles through their activity" (Acts 15:12, CEB). Matthew connected the Antiochean local stories with his Jesus narrative on at least two matters—the miracles themselves and the inclusion of diverse peoples. Antioch, as noted above, had a strong official Roman presence and residents from many nations. The synagogues there were centuries old and had historically drawn Greeks into their sphere.⁵⁵ For Matthew to show regard for a centurion and for a synagogue leader affirms the welcoming traits of Antiochean synagogues. In the aftermath of the upheaval of Titus's sacking of Jerusalem, this promotes alternatives to the experiences that Christians suffered elsewhere when they were excluded from synagogues. Further, in a city that featured elitist power and wealth, Matthew's stories attend to those who are on the margins. By including these stories, Matthew emphasizes to the church that the diverse participants and neighbors are all subjects to whom the mercy of healing and inclusion is offered without regard for cultural or societal biases.

Matthew is also reshaping the meaning of authority, and in so doing is speaking to the new reality of the gospel. It appears that other authorities dominate—synagogues in some locales excluded Christians and Rome's power is dominant. Jesus demonstrates power/authority, but in the Antiochean church (as with Jesus' learning community), he

⁵⁵ Bernadette J. Brooten, "The Jews of Ancient Antioch," in *Antioch: The Lost Ancient City*, ed. Christine Kondoleon (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 30.

is not coercive. Other authorities are not simply displaced. The Antioch church is given a new reality that does not match their probable preference for a God of dominance. Rather there are signs, real tangible mercy and grace. They cannot control their situation, and God is not handing them a reign that immediately displaces other powers. They can receive Matthew's stories—this collection of diverse, awesome, intriguing accounts—which will hopefully leave them wondering (like the disciples) how they are to live. That leads to the next teaching section.

Matthew 9:35–11:1—Second Sermon: Calling and Sending the Twelve

The activities of Jesus in Galilee have not only connected Jesus' words and authority with his healing and exorcisms among various crowds, but the sequence also leads to naming an increasing number for the primary learning community—now constituting the twelve (Matt. 10:2–4). Matthew sets up this step with a summary statement about the actions and preaching of Jesus and his perceptions as crowds continually form and follow (Matt. 9:35). Paralleling reflections in the midst of actions, Matthew describes how Jesus views the crowds: “he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36) and that this, to switch metaphors, is a plentiful harvest (Matt. 9:37). These metaphors shape the world in which Jesus' disciples and Matthew's Antiochean church live. The multiple crowds, so described, lead to Jesus' naming of the twelve, and we assume they have been schooled in Jesus' praxis because they are immediately sent to do what they have been observing and experiencing in the presence of Jesus. This work of Jesus is now the work of the twelve.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ As the section progresses, it is obvious that the text has much to do with Matthew's audience; see Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 144–9; W. D. William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew: Vol. 2* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 179.

The instructions to the twelve form what is considered the “sermon” of this teaching block and take up the rest of chapter ten. Like the first sermon, this section apparently contains material from a specific teaching, but additional related materials have been drawn from other settings. While Jesus has been ministering somewhat broadly (geographic spread that included a multicultural breadth—Syria, Decapolis, a federation of ten Hellenistic cities, and personal attention to a centurion), the twelve could relax just a bit knowing their work at this time was to be with Jews.⁵⁷ But they now need to not only proclaim about Jesus and the kingdom of heaven, they are to do the same works that Jesus has been doing. This not only shows their agency, it also continues a systems view of God’s engagement with the world—there is more to Jesus inauguration than words; the brokenness that God is addressing includes bodies, powers, politics, and economics. But the instructions might have increased some stress by limiting what they can take with them; he is making them dependent on people they don’t know. That means that those sheep (a term that Freire would note as appropriately recognizing oppression but that could objectify them) are actually subjects—they have the needed resources, the contexts, the hospitality, even the worthiness for this kingdom work. Matthew also notes that Jesus switches the application of the metaphor—now the twelve are sheep!

This dangerous environment becomes central to the rest of the chapter. These learning communities (the disciples/apostles and others who pick up their work, and the Antiochian church) are to be under no illusion about the world they work in. Certainly Jesus-followers in Galilee and Judea were persecuted during Jesus’ lifetime, and evidently some towns that the twelve initially visited were inhospitable. But the teachings here are used by Matthew to set up some meanings that appear to be far more relevant to

⁵⁷ The non-Jewish connections do not seem to indicate initiatives by Jesus; his explicit instructions for the gospel to go beyond the Jews awaits the final chapter—Matthew 28:16–20.

later years, perhaps especially leading up to the Titus's invasion. All of the trials (literal and figurative), opposition, suffering, and deaths that Jesus foretells have been present in the decades following Jesus' Ascension. His instructions here regarding how to respond in the presence of government authorities is relevant for the twelve in some cases, but more so in the next decades in light of Rome's persecution. Those who are arriving in Antioch after Titus's conquest will hear these words of Jesus in that horrific context. So strange comfort arises in knowing that this is not a surprise; Jesus' teaching included how to continue in the midst of such trauma, and Matthew's instructions refer more specifically to those later challenges.

Jesus fronts the work of meaning-making as he describes the conflict they will face (and that Matthew's community has especially been experiencing). The Pharisees have already made the charge that Jesus draws on demonic power, and that is only the beginning of the opposition. Jesus addresses this in regard to his lordship and his role as teacher; his followers are implicated in his lordship (so they are bound to suffer), and secrets will be brought to light, often because they will be proclaiming what they've learned from Jesus. Again, this is giving important, difficult, critical work to the learning community. As Heifetz emphasizes, the conflicts that are perpetually challenging us need to be brought into the open. Learning cannot work inside groups that are committed to avoidance. What has begun in Galilee will increase in intensity. The words of Jesus are even more meaningful as Matthew encourages, instructs, and commissions the Antiochean community concerning their own life and mission.

Perhaps most helpful is this picture of a learning team (the inner group in the text) engaging an environment rather than retreating for reasons of safety and preservation. The construction of this new world is one that means life lived among others, even if that means risk. The initial forays are among Jewish kin, but Jesus and Matthew soon make obvious that such initiatives extend to Gentiles (including his instructions in chapter twenty-eight). In other words, to

know (experience) God's presence and favor is to be engaged beyond the learning team. While the twelve in Palestine might not grasp this quickly, the Antiochean church has already witnessed this boundary crossing. Their speaking and acting among neighbors (locally and elsewhere) is with the conviction that God's grace is for all *ethnoi* (something not specific until Matthew 28). It is in this action-reflection (engagement then reflection/conversations) that they are continuing to become the new reality. There is heat here—Jesus notes that divisions and animosities will continue, even in response to this proclamation. In addition, both lowering and raising the temperature is explicit: “Therefore, everyone who acknowledges me before people, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven. But everyone who denies me before people, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32–33). So the benefits and costs of being subject-agents are emphasized; these learning teams might have seen themselves as oppressed objects, but Jesus and Matthew place their role as agents right in the middle of this action-reflection sequence.

Concluding Thoughts on Learning Communities and Leadership

How is Jesus shaping a community of learners-followers? How is Matthew shaping a church in Antioch? Both communities live in the midst of histories, powers, religious traditions and practices, the movements of an empire, the materiality of bodies and tangible goods, and the actions of people. Gergen would front meanings and meaning-making: If you stand in the middle of the beatitudes, and see everything through the kingdom of heaven being present in Jesus, you live in one reality; if you live inside the world of the Pharisees or the Jewish rulers or Herod or Titus's movements, you live in another world.

The people of Palestine and Antioch have been formed in their (constructed) worlds. Now Jesus is positing a world that is both prior to his coming (God has been continually active) but even more his presence is now re-creating the

world.⁵⁸ The beatitudes, the presence of God's mercy, the assurance of God's presence in the midst of trials, the way that authority is working in the world—these are all subject to the meanings that Jesus is introducing. Regarding those who live and speak differently (within another construct), Jesus says, “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered and nothing secret that will not become known” (Matt. 10:26).

To frame this, Gergen can take us further. Social construction notes that meanings are changed in the midst of relationships.⁵⁹ Hearers have an opportunity to be related to Jesus and his Father, and that changes their relationships with those who are socially marginalized and with religious parties and with Rome. Some of the consequences here are alarming: Jesus describes the tearing this can bring to families (Matt. 10:34–37). But there is a profound new belonging made possible among those previously distained and denigrated, among forgiven sinners, among those who are hospitable, and among disciples who give testimony to the kingdom that Jesus is making present.

In these texts, we see Jesus and Matthew emphasize Freire's emphasis on action-reflection. Well-being is defined by life as people of Jesus' Father, and participation requires awareness (reflection) that then includes turning (repenting) into new ways of thinking and acting (discipleship). Jesus and Matthew know that learning communities need help, so the text continually communicates, “Observe, now let me help you think about it, now try this, now think about it.” Freire also emphasizes that humans are subject-agents, which seems somewhat peculiar in Jesus' actions/words and in Matthew's texts: four women in a list of otherwise male ancestors, some foreign emissaries with gifts for a new king, a rather ragged desert prophet, then the meek and those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful and the peacemakers, the hemorrhaging woman, a despised tax

⁵⁸ Gergen's first assumption posits that “the way in which we understand the world is not required by ‘what there is’”; Gergen, 5–6.

⁵⁹ Gergen's second assumption posits that “the ways in which we describe and explain the world are the outcomes of relationships”; Gergen, 6–8.

collector, two blind men, and sheep who become witnesses and harvesters. To the growing community of learners, Jesus claims, “You are the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). To paraphrase: “You are active agents, in spite of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Romans, so let your words and actions reveal God’s presence and priorities.” Imagine the impact of this in Antioch where the church, already under Rome’s thumb, is being overwhelmed with those fleeing Titus’s violence. This messy, chaotic, multicultural, marginalized gathering in the empire’s third-largest city are told they are the recipients of this identity and agency: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven,” and “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (clothing, food) will be given to you as well” (Matt. 5:16, 6:33). “You are not subjects not *of* the empire but *in* the empire, and agents of God’s kingdom.”

Per Heifetz, the holding environments, as shaped by Jesus and later by Matthew, have obvious elements of increasing the heat: a lack of conformity regarding Jesus’ actions and the expectations of Jewish authorities, various interpretive moves concerning their sacred texts, a claim regarding authority to forgive sins, and, with the disciples, sleeping in their boat as it gets swamped by storm, and sending them to numerous towns while telling them the region is dangerous. The heat is often not directed at the disciples, but they would sense the overall tensions of the venture. Jesus also lowers the temperature as he constructs for them a truer and more complete picture of God’s engagement, especially for those who have more than their share of stress from disease, poverty, false accusations, demons, persecution, and seemingly relentless oppression. Also, as noted in regard to Freire’s perspective concerning agent-subjects, many in these stories would fit Heifetz’s valuing the “voices from below.” And, indirectly throughout but explicitly in chapter ten, he gives the work to others who in turn pass the work further.

These same observations fit Matthew’s Antioch, where the minority position of the Christians and the immense

trauma of immigrants arriving from Titus's invasion make for unmanageable challenges in the church. Just as their expectations and imaginations are likely to be challenged by events, these narratives and teachings remind them that Jesus did not paint a false future—dangers would continue—but Matthew breathes life into the community. Sight, interpretive options, textual connections, and concrete steps are all elements of grace. So just as they ask “What are we to be doing?” chapter ten reminds them: engage this town, offer your peace, “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons” (Matt. 10:8) and announce “The kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 10:7). They are agents/subjects rather than helpless objects in the imperial machine.

A practical theology method follows a sequence that engages our current practices, draws on resources from our own culture (like those specified as I began this paper), engages the biblical texts (and various commentators), then moves toward new imagination and experiments for our own faith communities and contexts. In what ways might this reading of Matthew help us see in our own contexts? With a focus on recent questions about missional ecclesiology, especially how churches discern God's initiatives in their own contexts so that they might participate, a few observations and questions rise from this study. I believe these indicate avenues of leadership:

- The text brings to Antioch stories that catch the ears of the diverse (and traumatized) audience, including Jews recently arriving from Palestine, Hellenists, Gentiles, and believers of all sorts. Do our churches know and tell stories in which our diverse neighbors and immigrant newcomers are honored subjects?
- Matthew indicates that he knows the numerous ways that Antiochean hearers have faced traumas and disorientation. When we make decision about what to construct with our words, do we show a familiarity with our neighbors that arises from having lived among them, being welcomed into their lives and stories?

- Jesus invites learners to watch, reflect, act, rethink their texts, try new activity patterns, and reflect even more. How can we engage, and invite others into, the practices of action-reflection as we live among our friends in churches and contexts?
- Concerning those who are insiders to a tradition and its ways (like the Jews around Jesus or in Antioch, and the mainliners and evangelicals among us), do we provide both heat and cooling in ways that prompt new sight, reflection, and perhaps tentative participation in steps shaped by God's reorienting love?
- In a pluralist society (akin to the diverse marketplace of Antioch), how confident are we to engage Jesus' claim on our mental models and vocations: "You are the light of the world," and "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven"? (Matt. 5:14; 10:32)

As we engage this work of reading sacred texts, using the lenses of learning and leadership, and reflecting on our contexts, we can join others in praying, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Learning doesn't stop with the reading of the text; it just continues in the ongoing sequence of action-reflection with God, who is continually present and active and beckoning.

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