

Matthew:
Why was it the Preferred Gospel
of the Apostolic Fathers?

NT5202 – Birth of the New Testament
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Introduction

As far as the Apostolic Fathers are concerned, Matthew has a long standing history of acceptance among the four canonical Gospels and not only acceptance, but even preference. Why was Matthew the preferred Gospel of the Apostolic Fathers? While a systematic examination of all the references to Matthew in the Apostolic Fathers will not be attempted in order to establish the reason for preference, some more generalized statements with brief examples will be made concerning the reasons for preference. However, in order to answer the question of 'why,' a preliminary question must be answered first – “*Was* Matthew the preferred Gospel of the Apostolic Fathers?”

Gospel Usage in the Apostolic Fathers¹

While what follows does not do full justice to the many citations, allusions and parallels (neither being comprehensive in referencing or classifying of such connections) found in the Apostolic Fathers and the four canonical Gospel accounts – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – a cursory examination of each of the writings/writers will be helpful in establishing the reliance of each Apostolic Father upon any of the four particular Gospel accounts. The conclusion that Matthew is indeed the preferred Gospel account of the Apostolic Fathers will have to wait until the data has been briefly surveyed.

Clement of Rome

Clement of Rome makes use of Matthew, Mark and Luke, but the references (whether directly or as allusions) to Matthew are slightly more (four times) than Mark (two times) and Luke (three times). One of these is found in all three Synoptics: “Woe to that man by whom

¹ For the sake of this paper the “Apostolic Fathers” consists of Clement of Rome's first letter, Ignatius of Antioch's seven acknowledged letters, Polycarp's two letters, the *Didache* and the Epistle of Barnabas. Though a few others could be included in this list these are typically considered to be the primary and representative witnesses of the Apostolic Fathers.

offenses come! It were better for him that he had never been born, than that he should cast a stumbling-block before one of my elect. Yea, it were better for him that a millstone should be hung about his neck, and he should be sunk in the depths of the sea, than that he should cast a stumbling-block before one of my little ones” (1 Cl.46:8; Mt.18:6; 26:24; Mk.9:42; Lk.17:20). One is found only in Matthew and Mark (though it seems more likely to be a reference to Isaiah without specifically using Matthew or Mark): “This people honoureth Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me” (1 Cl.15:2; Isa.29:13; Mt.15:8; Mk.7:6).² The last shared tradition is found only in Matthew and Luke: “Be ye merciful, that ye may obtain mercy; forgive, that it may be forgiven to you; as ye do, so shall it be done unto you; as ye judge, so shall ye be judged; as ye are kind, so shall kindness be shown to you; with what measure ye mete, with the same it shall be measured to you” (1 Cl.13:2; Mt.6:12-15; 7:2; Lk.6:36-38). There is also one allusion which has connections only to Luke (1 Cl.24:5; Lk.6:36-38); and one which alludes only to Matthew (1 Cl.27:5; Mt.24:35).

Ignatius of Antioch

There are three direct relationships with Matthew found in Ignatius and only one from Luke. In his letter to the Ephesians (14:2) he states “The tree is known by its fruit” (Mt.12:33). In his letter to the Smyrnaeans (6:1), he uses the phrase “Let him accept it who can” apparently borrowing from Mt.19:12. Writing to Polycarp (2:2), he refers to the need to be “wise as serpents” and “harmless as doves” (Mt.10:16). The single textual relationship to Luke's account is found in his letter to the Smyrnaeans (2:1-2): “Take hold of me, touch me and see that I am not a bodiless ghost” (Lk.24:39). Thus, Ignatius most directly cites Matthew, with only one reference to Luke and the plethora of allusions to Matthew listed below. This would indicate

² It seems more likely to be a reference to Isaiah without specifically using the citation of Isaiah from either Matthew or Mark, though Matthew or Mark or both may possibly have influenced the use of the Isaiah passage.

clearly that Ignatius had a definite preference for Matthew.³

One needs only note the numerous allusions to Matthew that are found in Ignatius' writings to be persuaded that Matthew indeed played a strong role in the life and teaching of Ignatius (only references are given and without any comments):⁴ Eph.5:2 (Mt 18:19-20); Eph.6:1 (Mt 10:40; 21:33-41); Eph.10:3 (Mt.13:25); Eph.11:1 (Mt.3:7); Eph.14:2 (Mt.12:33); Eph.15:1 (Mt.23:8); Eph.16:2 (Mt.3:12); Eph.17:1 (Mt.26:6-13); Eph.19 (Mt.2:2, 9); Magn.5:2 (Mt.22:19); Magn.8:2 (Mt.5:11-12); Magn.9:1 (Mt.27:52); Trall.9:1 (Mt.11:19); Trall.11:1 (Mt.15:13); Rom.9:3 (Mt.10:41-42, 18:5); Phila.2:1-2 (Mt.7:15); Phila.3:1 (Mt.15:13); Phila.6:1 (Mt.23:27); Phila.7:2 (Mt.16:17); Smyr.6:1 (Mt.19:12); Smyr.6:2 (Mt 6:28); Poly.1:1 (Mt 7:25); Poly.1:2-3 (Mt 8:17).

Polycarp

Polycarp cites a particularly Matthean tradition six times: “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Phil.2:3; Mt.7:1); if we ask forgiveness, “we ought also ourselves to forgive” (Phil.6:2; Mt.6:12-14); praying to God “not to lead us into temptation” (Phil.7:2; Mt.6:13; 26:41); pray “for those that persecute and hate you” (Phil.12:3; Mt.5:44); the Gospel does not instruct the believer to surrender themselves to suffering (Martyr 4:1; allusion to Mt.10:23); a reference to treating Jesus as a “robber” in the manner he was arrested (Martyr 7:1; Mt.26:55). There is one particularly Lucan tradition in Ignatius' letter to the Philippians (2:3) where he reminds them to

3 It would appear that he at least had knowledge of a similar source to Luke and likely of Luke's Gospel itself. He also makes reference to John's theology in such a passage as his letter to the Romans (3:4). This shows some possible familiarity with the Gospel according to John and therefore strengthens the notion that Ignatius has given preference to Matthew with knowledge of at least Luke and John.

4 No other Gospels are referenced in this section simply in order to conserve space, but it should be noted that no others appear to play nearly as significant a role in specifically influencing Ignatius' writings. “There seems to be little question that Ignatius knew and used Matthew as his primary gospel [sic]” with no appeal to Mark and only one possible reference to Luke (Smyr.3:2-3) and only an “acquaintance” with John's “themes,” but “no particular dependence upon the text of the gospel [sic] of John itself.” Huub van de Sandt, Ed., *Matthew and the Didache: Two Documents From the Same Jewish-Christian Milieu?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 44-45.

“be merciful” in order to receive mercy (Lk.6:36).

There are five double traditions that are cited, and each of the five noticeably includes Matthew as one of the possible sources. He includes two double traditions found in Matthew and Mark where he writes, “The Spirit truly is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Phil.7:2; Mt.26:41; Mk.14:38) and refers to “the cup” of Christ (Martyr 14:2; Mt.20:22; 26:39; Mk.10:38). There are also three double traditions from Matthew and Luke also found in his letter to the Philippians (2:3): “forgive and it shall be forgiven you” (Mt.6:12; Lk.6:37); “with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Mt.7:2; Lk.6:38); and “blessed are the poor, and those that are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (Mt.5:3; Lk.6:20).

The Didache

Matthew and the *Didache* have long been considered to share a close textual relationship. There is actually only one statement in the *Didache* (16:1) that seems to share a textual tradition with Luke (12:35) alone and this one reference only utilizes the Lucan objects of “lamps” and “loins” in reference to making sure one is prepared for the Lord's coming. However, there are ten statements with some form of parallel or strong allusion found in Matthew (with some having lesser textual connections to Mark and Luke): an allusion to the teaching of Jesus to not “swear” by anything (Did.2:3; Mt.5:34); “the meek shall inherit the earth” (Did.3:7; Mt.5:5); the baptismal formula in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Did.7:1; Mt.28:19); instruction to “fast” in a different manner than the “hypocrites” (Did.8:1; Mt.6:16); instruction to not “pray” as the “hypocrites” and also the Lord's Prayer (Did.8:2; Mt.6:5, 9-13; contrast with Lk.11:2-4); instruction to not give what is holy to the “dogs” (Did.9:5; Mt.7:6); a reference to the “four winds” (Did.10:6; Mt.24:31); instruction to receive every apostle “as the Lord” (Did.11:4; Mt.10:40); reproof of one another according to the Gospel (Did.15:3; Mt.18:15-17); a reminder

that no one knows “the hour” in which the Lord is coming again (Did.16:2; Mt.24:42); and details concerning the last day and second coming (Did.16:3-8; Mt.24:10-12, 24, 30-31).

There are five passages that have parallels and strong allusions demonstrating some textual relationship to a double Gospel tradition and one that seems to borrow from Matthew, Mark and John (Did.13:2; Mt.26:29; Mk.14:25; Jn.15:1). The Greatest Commandment (and the one like it) is the only jointly Matthew (22:37, 39) and Mark (12:30-31) tradition found in the *Didache* (1:2). The other four belong to the Matthew and Luke tradition: the Golden Rule (which is interestingly enough made into a negative form – Did.1:2; Mt.7:12; Lk.6:31); the extended instructions to bless those who curse you, prayer and love for enemies, love in a different manner than the Gentiles (Did.1:3; Mt.5:44, 46-47; Lk.6:32); instruction concerning a proper response to those who abuse the believer (Did.1:4; Mt.5:39-41; Lk.6:29-30); a combined allusion concerning giving and full retribution (Did.1:5; Mt.5:26; Lk.6:30); and a reference to the worthiness of someone who labors to receive support (Did.13:2; Mt.10:10; Lk.10:7).

Epistle of Barnabus

The Epistle of Barnabus shares affinity with only Matthew on one occasion: “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Barn.4:14; Mt.22:14). One passage is found in Matthew (5:42) and Luke (6:30) which speaks of giving “to everyone that asks thee” (Barn.19:11). There is also a reference which is found in all three of the Synoptics concerning Jesus coming “not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Barn.5:9; Mt.9:13; Mk.2:17; Lk.5:32). Finally, there is the slim possibility that Matthew (22:44) is the source for Barnabus 12:10 – “The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool.” Although there are numerous other passages (Acts 2:34; 1 Cor.15:25; Heb.1:13; 10:13) which also cite the Psalmist (110:1), so this would be almost surprising if the source for this particular verse in the Epistle of

Barnabus was in fact Matthew.

Conclusion: Matthew is the Preferred Gospel Account of the Apostolic Fathers

It seems almost incontestable that Matthew was the preferred (or “most popular” or even “favourite”) Gospel account of the early Church.⁵ This seems true to such an extent that many authors can simply take this for granted and simply state such in passing. The preceding evidence has been in order to demonstrate that there is ample reason to believe that given the testimony of the Apostolic Fathers, Matthew was the preferred Gospel account. This testimony is inherently limited and cannot technically speak for the whole Church of that era, yet given the lack of witnesses to the contrary that are extant, there is no other conclusion that has such support in its favor.

Two Reasons the Apostolic Father Preferred Matthew

While the weight of the evidence would clearly suggest Matthew was indeed the preferred Gospel account of the Apostolic Fathers (and therefore of the early Church),⁶ this fails to answer a further question that is at least equally (if not more) important and is the more primary question of interest in this study: “*Why* was Matthew the preferred Gospel account of the Apostolic Fathers?” This question will be the focus of the remaining discussion. There appears to be two primary reasons for preferring Matthew.

5 D. A. Carson, “The Gospel According to John,” *Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1991), 79, 80; F. David Farnell, “The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church: The Testimony to the Priority of Matthew’s Gospel,” *TMSJ* 10/1 (Spring 1999), 54; and E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 9n.5, 12.

6 This assumes that the Apostolic Fathers are making use of Matthew and not that Matthew and the Apostolic Fathers are using a similar tradition and therefore are paralleled. It is typically taken for granted that the *Didache* used Matthew’s Gospel. “The *Didache* is visibly shaped by Mathew, which was the Gospel used in its community” Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 152. However, there are others who specialize in *Didache* studies that question such an assumption and would postulate nothing more than that Matthew and the *Didache* used the same source or sources rather than having a direct relationship (for an example see Nicholas Perrin, “Comparing Matthew with the *Didache*: Some Methodological Reflections,” Paper delivered to the *Didache* Group at the SBL Annual Meeting in San Antonio, Texas on Saturday, Nov. 20th, 2004).

The first is the very early tradition that Matthew wrote his Gospel account before the others. While the modern consensus is definitely in favor of Marcan priority, for the sake of argument the very early tradition of Matthean priority may likely have given Matthew a special favoring in the wider Church. Whether Matthew was written first or not, would not really be the issue as the early tradition would be sufficient to give a significant boost to the recognition of Matthew as authoritative for the Church. This early tradition would seem likely to have had influence in the Early Church concerning Matthew. Very likely this Gospel account would have found wider dissemination in the Early Church as well as receiving particular preference given the status of the tradition.

The second is the proposed function of Matthew in relation to the Early Church. While each of the canonical Gospel accounts would have been useful to the Early Church, Matthew seems to be the most readily utilitarian for specific issues facing the Church. The Apostolic Fathers' preference for Matthew seems therefore likely to have been because of this particular usefulness in the overall life of the Early Church. Both of the two contributing factors to the preference given to Matthew will be dealt with below.

1 – Early Tradition Concerning Matthew

The earliest statement about Matthew's Gospel is found in the writings of Papias. His statement serves as foundational for what follows in this first section, since this early tradition is typically dated to the first half of the second century and therefore provides a contemporary witness to a tradition in the time of the Apostolic Fathers. According to Eusebius (who was citing Irenaeus), the Apostolic Father Papias wrote that “Matthew collected the oracles (*logia*) in the Hebrew language, and each interpreted them as best he could” (*Ecc. Hist.* III.39.16).

Papias' statement is actually echoed with approval by Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* III 1.1).

Tertullian held to the priority of John and Matthew because they were the only Gospels written by Apostles (*Adv. Marcionem* IV.2, 5). According to Eusebius, Origen wrote the following about the composition of the Gospels, “The first to be written was that according to Matthew, once a tax-collector but later an apostle of Jesus Christ; he published it for those who had come to faith from Judaism, and it was composed in Hebrew letters” (*Ecc. Hist.* VI.25.3-6). Eusebius also refers to one Pantaenus who traveled to India to share the good news of Jesus and discovered that Bartholomew had already been in India for some time preaching to them from the Gospel of Matthew and had even left them a copy of “the writing of Matthew in Hebrew letters” (*Ecc. Hist.* III.24.5-6). In the same passage Eusebius gives his own accounting that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew for Hebrews (converts?). Jerome also agreed when he wrote, “Matthew, who is also called Levi, a former tax-collector then an apostle, first composed a gospel of Christ in Judaea, for the sake of those who had come to faith out of the circumcision, in Hebrew letters and words” (*De Viris Illustribus* 3).

There is actually no voice known from the first many centuries after Christ which opposes this tradition or even seems to question it. While all of the merits of what was passed on concerning the composition of Matthew may not be accurate (and are rejected by many modern scholars), the tradition itself gives support to the reason why Matthew seems to have been the preferred Gospel. Even the highly questionable notion of Matthew having composed his Gospel in Hebrew (which need not be accepted as accurate) gives credence to his Gospel because it passes on a tradition that suggests a Hebrew witness against the Jews and in defense of Christ and His Church. This appears to have been a major concern in the Early Church as evidenced by Justin Martyr's *Dialogue With Trypho*. Apart from the contemporary view of the trustworthiness of the tradition, the Early Church embraced the Gospel According to Matthew because it was

believed to have been written by an apostle in Hebrew

1.1 – Matthew – Written by the Apostle Matthew

The belief that Matthew (also called 'Levi') was the author of the Gospel account accredited to his name is “an early and unanimous tradition”⁷ Though many in our era have questioned (many of those rather dismissively) whether Matthew (Levi), who was the Apostle, was the author of this Gospel, the early consensus was “unanimous” that the writer was indeed the Apostle. It has been suggested that Matthew and John were particularly favorite Gospel accounts because “they were both considered to have been written by apostles.”⁸ Matthew and John were the only Apostles to write Gospels (despite the numerous spurious and pseudonymous Gospels that purported otherwise), while Mark and Luke only belonged to the apostolic group, but were not themselves Apostles. The paucity of Johannine citations in the Apostolic Fathers does not necessarily argue against this particular point, simply because it would appear (according to tradition and likely it happened as such) John wrote his Gospel last after the other Apostles had largely passed from the scene. Therefore, John's Gospel would not have enjoyed nearly the same preference given its nearness in time to the Apostolic Fathers who may not as yet have had the opportunity to become familiar with John's account.⁹

1.2 – Matthew – The LOGIA

Papias is reputed to have written a five volume book using **logia** in his title which R. T. France may be correct in interpreting just what Papias meant by the term. “Papias' own title used **logia** in a broader sense, of the divinely inspired record of Jesus' life and teaching (and even of subsequent events?)....Eusebius may not have been mistaken in assuming that when Papias spoke of Matthew compiling **logia** he was talking about a Gospel record, not just a collection of

7 R.T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1989), 66.

8 Dave E. Aune, Ed., *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2001), 53.

9 For further explanation on Matthew's priority due to the date of composition in the tradition see 1.4 below.

sayings.”¹⁰ However, many today believe that the **logia** of Matthew to which Papias refers does not in fact refer to our current Gospel of Matthew but to some other Gospel or collection of sayings.¹¹ Again, the current opposition to Papias' use of **logia** which Matthew recorded has little bearing on the Early Church's (and therefore the Apostolic Fathers') understanding of the **logia**. The Early Church (as evidenced by the only surviving tradition) seems to have thought of the **logia** as pertaining to the Gospel itself which is what R. T. France picks up on. There does not seem to be any other understanding in the first centuries that would suggest otherwise. It is not the modern understanding, but the Early Church's understanding that is what matters for our purpose.

1.3 – Matthew – Written in 'Hebrew'¹²

The tradition that Matthew wrote the Gospel in 'Hebrew' is also unanimous in the early centuries. What advantage would the book of Matthew being written in 'Hebrew' serve for our purposes? If the Apostolic Fathers believed he wrote his Gospel in 'Hebrew' it would seem that this gives it a specifically apologetic function when dealing with Jewish antagonists. A 'Hebrew' Gospel would support the claims that indeed the Christian faith was not Gentile, but also that the good news would confront the Jews with their need to embrace the Jewish Messiah. Also, it would be understood to have been written early (even first) and therefore hold a place of preference within the Church. If it was written in 'Hebrew' this would further suggest that it was written while Matthew was in Palestine (where the Jews still spoke 'Hebrew'), and therefore it might hold a certain connection to the very place where Christ had been as testimony against it.

10 France, 60.

11 Ibid., 62-66; Sanders, 10-11, 16; but see contrary comments in Christopher M. Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 43.

12 It has been debated whether the 'Hebrew' referred to in the quote by Papias (and the Early Church Fathers referred to previously who use similar language) was in fact Aramaic or Hebrew or a Hebrew transliteration.

Perhaps this particular point is the weakest, but it should be borne in mind that there appears to have been some sense of special authority or place of prominence given to Matthew who wrote his Gospel in 'Hebrew' since it is specifically echoed numerous times as somehow pertinent and not simply as a non-essential detail to be included within the tradition. As has been stated before, it does not concern us whether Matthew did indeed write his Gospel in 'Hebrew' or not, but only that this tradition served a specifically polemical and authoritative function for the Apostolic Fathers.

1.4 – Matthew – Written First

While the evidence seems to clearly point to the preference for Matthew in the Apostolic Fathers' era, the wide usage of Matthew among the Fathers may also be due in part to the early and therefore wide circulation of his Gospel account. If the early and unanimous tradition about Matthew had any relevance for the Early Church it would suggest that Matthew wrote prior to the other Gospels and therefore should enjoy wide acceptance and dissemination. As far as the Early Church was concerned, Matthew's account would be regarded as the earliest specifically apostolic (as opposed to Mark and Luke) record of Jesus life and teachings and perhaps be viewed as foundational for the other accounts. Perhaps this may be the reason that many of the manuscripts extant contain Matthew first in the ordering of the Gospels. The modern question of whether Matthew was written first (the majority modern opinion being that it was not the first) or written after Mark and possibly Luke does not affect our question, since it was the unanimous voice of the Early Church that it was written first. The Apostolic Fathers would likely have capitalized on this understood priority of Matthew.

2 – Usefulness of Matthew in the Early Church

The traditions surrounding Matthew in the Early Church only served to strengthen what

would appear to be the more significant reason for the Apostolic Fathers' preference of Matthew. Ultimately Matthew was thought particularly useful for the practical issues which the Church was encountering.¹³ "One can argue strongly that Matthew's Gospel has been the most influential book in the Bible for Christian life," because of its "spirituality," "ethics or moral theology," and "community."¹⁴ In fact, his Gospel account rightly may be described as a pastoral theology.¹⁵ Based off this description, what follows will be a pastorally structured (although only cursory) survey of the more significant issues around the life of and concerns of the Church. The specially suited ecclesial usefulness of Matthew will become even more apparent as the following categories of usefulness are surveyed: the didactic, the catechetical, the ecclesiological, the polemical, and the teleological.

2.1 – Didactic – Instructing the Church

There are at least five extended sections of Matthew that are specifically didactic. These constitute a significant portion of the whole Gospel and appear to have been arranged in their respective groupings rather than scattered throughout the Gospel. The structuring of Matthew according to this schematic (where the teaching portions are grouped together) would certainly better facilitate instruction in the local church. Also, the materials lend themselves to being taught since they deal with specific issues which the Church faced on a daily basis. R. T. France offers a lengthy (though by no means exhaustive) list of issues which Matthew has provided instruction for the life of the Church:

Sayings and dialogues throughout the gospel would have obvious relevance to issues arising in the developing life of the Christian communities, such as the right use of the sabbath (12:1-14), the authority of tradition (15:1-9) and the nature of true purity (15:10-20), the appropriate attitude to taxation both religious (17:24-

¹³ France, 18-20

¹⁴ Aune, 70.

¹⁵ Ibid., 62, 72; and see the chapters specifically dealing with this subject in greater detail in France, 242-278; and Luz, 143-164.

27) and secular (22:15-22), marriage and bereavement (22:23-33), divorce and singleness (19:3-12), wealth and poverty (19:16-30), the danger of concern for status within the disciple group (20:20-28), the acceptance of the unacceptable (8:5-13; 9:10-13; 15:21-28), the priority of discipleship over other loyalties (8:18-22; 12:46-50; 16:24-28).¹⁶

The Apostolic Fathers wrote in order to instruct the Church concerning all sorts of issues that Matthew specifically addressed which are mentioned above. Other community life issues such as forgiveness, love for one another, restitution, generosity, righteousness, humility, and un-hypocritical living in light of Christ's life, teaching, and soon coming again are prominent in the Apostolic Fathers and thus explain the usefulness Matthew presented them. Granted, these community life issues are somewhat covered in the other Gospels but not nearly to the extent as they are in Matthew.

2.2 – Catechetical – Discipling the Church

The catechetical nature of Matthew also lent itself to the Apostolic Fathers who readily used the instruction concerning baptism, prayer, generosity, fasting, and discipline. The *Didache* offers an early catechetical work that is largely taken from Matthew. The forms for baptism (in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and prayer (“Our Father...”) appear to have been taken from Matthew (Mt.6:9-13; 28:19) where they already appear to be quite useful for catechesis. Generosity is made to be an essential ingredient in the catechesis of the Apostolic Fathers as it is in Matthew (5:42; 6:1-3; 10:8; 19:21) – whether it refers to generosity in forgiveness, love, alms, humility, or even resources. The discipling of the Early Church involved considerable teaching of a catechetical nature on generosity. Fasting was a prominent feature of the Early Church and Matthew records specific instructions about proper fasting (6:16-18; 9:14-15). Church discipline finds some lengthy treatment in Matthew (5:22-24; 7:1-6; 18:15-35) and

¹⁶ France, 255.

also was easily adaptable for the Apostolic Fathers for dealing with discipline issues.

2.3 – Ecclesiological – Establishing the Church

Matthew is the only Gospel to include the term “church” or *ekklhsia* (16:18 and twice in 18:17 – though its definition in the two passages is debated). Certainly any study of ecclesiology would be far too limited if it only examined the specific use of *ekklhsia* that occur in Matthew. There are many undertones in Matthew which suggest an ecclesiological thrust. Such terms as “brother” (5:22-24, etc.), “little ones” (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14), “elect” (Mt.24:22, 24, 31), “disciples” (8:21; 10:42), and even “scribe” (Mt.13:42) – and their various contextual uses – suggest this ecclesiological emphasis. Even the command of Jesus to not take the title “Rabbi” for yourself since all of his disciples are “brothers” (23:8) suggests that in light of the ecclesiological implications of Matthew there is a definite message against lording authority over others in the Church, while still maintaining that there would still be those who functioned as teachers in the Church, but should not hold it over the others who are being taught. Matthew is replete with many references to ecclesiological concerns that would be obviously useful to the nascent Church.

2.4 – Polemical – Defending the Church

The Early Church faced great opposition, but none seem as strong as the Jewish opposition. Matthew aided the Early Church by writing his Gospel in such a way that it might serve as a strong polemic against any threat, especially the antagonism of the Jews. Matthew records Jesus’ repeated refrain against the “hypocrites” (6:2, 5, 16; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13-15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51) served as a strong rebuke of the hypocrisy of the Jews who failed to embrace their Messiah and therefore failed to live as people of the covenant. Not only did this serve the Early Church by denouncing Judaism that fails to embrace Jesus, but it also reminded them of the need

to serve the Lord Jesus without hypocrisy and therefore as a positive witness (5:14-16) to those around them.

As much as the polemic of Matthew may have fruitfully offered aid to the apologetic of the Early Church, the more particular polemic concerned the person and work of Jesus. Some of what this might entail will be dealt with further in 2.5 below. What is worth mentioning here is the concern to see Christ Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament and therefore the fulfillment of Jewish longing. In Matthew, Jesus is emphatically pointed to as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and as such the Jewish resistance to the good news fails to see Jesus as their Lord and Messiah. In regard to the polemics in support of Jesus, Matthew also makes numerous claims associated with Jesus' death and resurrection which serve his polemic well: the resurrection of “many bodies of the saints” who arose, went into Jerusalem and gave witness (27:52-53); the “great earthquake” at His death that draws out the centurions confession (27:54); the attempt to guard the tomb and then to bribe the soldiers to lie about what happened to Jesus which was still being passed on to the day of the writing of the Gospel (27:64-66; 28:4, 11-15). These peculiarities at the end of Matthew only continue to highlight the hypocrisy of those who rejected Jesus since they were even moved to bribe others to lie about what really happened and to ignore the tremendous unavoidable miracles attesting to God's approval of Jesus as Lord and Christ. The Apostolic Fathers cannot have missed this and certainly utilized the notion of hypocrisy as found in Matthew.

2.5 – Teleological – Fulfilling the Church

It is not difficult to notice that probably the “central focus” of Matthew's theology is “fulfillment.”¹⁷ This teleological element of Matthew is nowhere more apparent than in those

¹⁷ Ibid., 166.

passages where the fulfillment of the Old Testament is made explicit (often using some variation of a formulaic expression): 1:22-23; 2:15; 2:17-18; 2:23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10; also in the less formulaic occurrences of 13:14; 26:54, 56. A fairly similar expression is found in John (12:38; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 19:24, 36) concerning Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament and (more strikingly) even Jesus' own words as finding fulfillment comparable to the Old Testament fulfillment (18:9, 32). However, Matthew certainly uses this phrase far more times and purposely draws attention to the fulfillment of the Scriptures in specific details of Jesus' life.

What does this have to do with “fulfilling the Church?” Christ as the fulfillment becomes the only one capable of fulfilling the requirements placed upon the Church as found with particular cogency in the Sermon on the Mount. He is not simply offering or even commanding a new ethic, but that He Himself fulfills the very demands that He makes and will enable His followers to do everything He has commanded. It is in this sense that Jesus “fulfills the Church.” The Apostolic Fathers would echo the teaching of Jesus as *the* fulfillment and therefore the standard by which everything and everyone is judged. He is also the one who has met the demands of His perfect judgment. The Apostolic Fathers use Jesus' words because Jesus is thought to be the canon by which all else is measured. Matthew has certainly made the same point by repeating the statement of Jesus concerning what He says in contrast to what has been heard as authoritative in the past (5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44; 12:6, 31; 17:12; 21:21). As the fulfillment of God's promises and commands, Jesus is *the* authority. This becomes clear at the very conclusion of Matthew (28:18-20) where Jesus declares that he has been given all authority and therefore they are commissioned to carry out everything he has commanded with the promise of His presence until “the end of the age.”

Conclusion

Though the examination of the forgoing questions are not exhaustive, it is hoped that a sufficiently comprehensive case has been made that the Apostolic Fathers did in fact prefer Matthew to the other Gospels and that the particular traditions early accompanying it, along with the pastoral usefulness of it, mutually contributed to its being preferred. While the answer to the first question has often been assumed (for good reason it would seem), the answer to the second question needs much further examination. Perhaps this is due to the more speculative nature of asking questions of “why” as opposed to somewhat (only slightly?) more concrete questions of “what.” If one stops at only asking “What connections exist between the texts” and never asks “Why does this connection exist” then there can never be fuller and richer understanding of the issues involved, only of the apparent results. More work should be done on the exact relationship between the Apostolic Fathers and the Gospels in order to more thoroughly understand the data and extrapolate more precise definitions of the relationships between the texts of each, but it is hoped that this brief survey has at least preliminarily proposed solutions to the forgoing questions.

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