



Six Themes
Everyone Should Know

Matthew

James E. Davison

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Press

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Six Themes Everyone Should Know series

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Introduction to the *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series

The *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series focuses on the study of Scripture. Bible study is vital to the lives of churches. Churches need ways of studying Scripture that can fit a variety of contexts and group needs. *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* studies offer a central feature of church adult educational programs. Their flexibility and accessibility make it possible to have short-term studies that introduce biblical books and their main themes.

Six Themes Everyone Should Know consists of six chapters that introduce major biblical themes. At the core of each chapter is an introduction and three major sections. These sections relate to key dimensions of Bible study. These sections ask:

- What does this biblical theme mean?
- What is the meaning of this biblical theme for the life of faith?
- What does this biblical theme mean for the church at this point in history for action?

This format presents a compact and accessible way for people in various educational settings to gain knowledge about major themes in the biblical books; to experience the impact of what Scripture means for Christian devotion to God; and to consider ways Scripture can lead to new directions for the church in action.

Introduction to *Matthew*

The Gospel according to Matthew is the first book of the New Testament and the first of the four Gospels. Along with the evangelists Mark, Luke, and John, Matthew provides an account of the life and ministries of Jesus. Matthew begins with the genealogy (1:1–17) and birth of Jesus (1:18–25) and ends with Jesus’ commissioning his disciples, after his resurrection, to “make disciples of all nations” and his promise: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:16–20).

The church has always found Matthew’s Gospel to be a rich source for understanding who Jesus of Nazareth was and what he said and did. This study looks at the main themes in Matthew’s Gospel. It focuses on Jesus as Messiah as a beginning point for considering Matthew’s perspective of who his Gospel is about as it portrays the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ important teachings are explored, and we find how they shape our Christian lives today. They give the church—as the community of faith—directions for its mission and ministries in the world. These focuses strengthen our faith. They nourish our lives even as we are challenged to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ and to embody his teachings in our daily living. Matthew’s Gospel can be a vital source of renewal for the church’s life and our own Christian experience as we seek to follow Jesus in word and deed.

John Calvin wrote that Matthew, as one of the four evangelists, sets before our eyes “Christ, sent by the Father, that our faith may recognize in Him the Author of the life of blessedness.”¹

May our lives be blessed by this study of the Gospel according to Matthew.

1. John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. A. W. Morrison, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, 12 vols. (1972; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), xii.

Biblical Backgrounds to Matthew

Author and Date

The Gospel according to Matthew was “most likely written about A.D. 90 by an unknown Christian who was most probably at home in a church located in or near Antioch of Syria. The date of A.D. 90 commends itself because the destruction of Jerusalem appears to be an event that was rapidly receding into the past [22:7].”

—Jack Dean Kingsbury, “Matthew, the Gospel according to,”
in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier
(San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), 613.

Composition

“For most scholars, the Two-Source Hypothesis still explains best the composition of Matthew. Apparently, the author drew on two written sources: Mark and a collection of sayings of Jesus called Q. In addition, he used traditions available only to him (M). From these, he fashioned a theologically sophisticated story of the life and ministry of Jesus. The formula at 4:17 and at 16:21 divides this story into three main parts: the figure of Jesus Messiah (1:1–4:16); the public ministry of Jesus Messiah and Israel’s repudiation of him (4:17–16:20); and the journey of Jesus Messiah to Jerusalem and his suffering, death, and resurrection (16:21–28:20).”

—*Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, 613–14.

Importance

One perspective on Matthew’s importance is that “there are indications, such as the Greek word *biblos*, “book,” in the title and the *five* major discourses in chapters 5–7, 10, 13, 18, and 24–25 that Matthew intended his work to serve as a foundation book for his community, like the Torah or five books of Moses in the synagogue. In fact, Matthew came to serve as a preeminent Gospel for the church as a whole. From the second century on, it is the most widely cited Gospel and the most frequently read in ancient liturgical lectionaries.”

—Reginald H. Fuller, “Matthew” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 951.

Jesus diverges from the usual expectation of Messiah in Israel, both in his own personal identity as the Son of God and Emmanuel and for his mission as one who serves and suffers for humanity.

Chapter 1

Embracing Jesus as Messiah

Scripture

The best way to begin a study of Matthew is to read the entire Gospel quickly. Do not look for details, but focus simply on getting a sense for the whole. You will begin to see patterns in Matthew's way of presenting Jesus' ministry, and you will also note words, phrases, and thoughts that recur frequently in the text.

Matthew 1:1, 17–25 describes the ancestry and birth of Jesus, including important names he is given.

Matthew 8:1–27 shows the great power Jesus possessed to heal those in need.

Matthew 11:25–12:14 portrays the deep compassion Jesus has for people and, in the process, makes clear his authority as the Son.

Matthew 25:31–46 narrates the important parable of the Sheep and the Goats, which we will refer to regularly in this study.

Prayer

Gracious God, who created the world and all in it, I praise your name for your marvelous works, for stars and planets, for seas and mountains, for us and all living creatures. That you created us in your very image is wonderful beyond words. In the face of our faults and failures, that you have sent your Son to redeem

us is far more than we could ever imagine, much less deserve. At the beginning of this study, I ask that you grant me insight to understand Jesus' teachings more fully. Draw me closer to him, the Messiah, your own beloved Son. Amen.

Introduction

Nearly one thousand years elapsed from King David's time to the birth of Jesus. During most of that period, Israel suffered under the domination of foreign rulers. As successive occupying empires became increasingly powerful, any hope of relief grew progressively dimmer. Many began to hope for the Lord God to intervene directly to free the nation and restore Israel's kingdom. How God might accomplish this miraculous intervention became the subject for much speculation, and many concluded that God would send armies of angelic beings to rescue the nation. Many also expected that a warrior king—a "messiah"—would lead these heavenly hosts.

Messiah is the Hebrew term for "anointed one," a reference to the fact that kings were anointed with oil as part of coronation ceremonies. Our word "Christ" derives from the equivalent Greek term for this symbolic act. Not surprisingly, hopes for a messiah often identified him with David—Israel's early, great ruler—hailing him as the "Son of David." As a mighty leader, the Messiah would guide Israel to victory over all the surrounding nations.

As we know, Jesus did not fit such a portrait at all. Born to a carpenter's family in poverty and a controversial itinerant preacher by trade, he was condemned to a despised death. Thus, in this Gospel, Matthew sets out to show that despite all outward appearances, Jesus is indeed Israel's expected Messiah. Not only that, Matthew asserts, Jesus as Messiah is much more than Israel could have anticipated.

While Matthew stands first in the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark was probably written earlier. Matthew appears to follow Mark's outline, adding a broad range of Jesus' teachings to Mark's many stories of Jesus' marvelous deeds. Matthew also adds further material, like the beautiful Christmas stories, editing all his material carefully. The end result is a well-rounded portrayal of Jesus' entire earthly life, all aimed at substantiating faith in Jesus as the true Messiah.

Matthew is traditionally identified as one of the twelve disciples, a tax collector by trade. For a variety of reasons, most scholars believe that in fact the author is unknown, but he probably was connected with the disciple. For our purposes, it is sufficient to refer to the writer as “Matthew.”

A Basic Theme: What Sort of Messiah Is Jesus?

Matthew describes the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry in this way: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (4:23). With this summary description, Matthew makes clear that Jesus the Messiah possesses marvelous divine power as he conducts his ministry.

Throughout the Gospel, Matthew narrates healings of individuals who suffer from illnesses or other physical disorders. Often-times, the healings occur among large crowds gathered around Jesus. At other times, a cure occurs more privately, as when Jesus enters Peter’s home and heals his mother-in-law (8:14). The power of Jesus to heal is so great, in fact, that he simply tells a centurion that his servant, who is lying paralyzed in the centurion’s home, will be healed, “and the servant was healed in that hour” (8:13).

As awe-inspiring as such physical healings may be, they are surpassed by other marvelous events through which Jesus demonstrates authority even over natural phenomena. He stills a storm on the Sea of Galilee (8:23–27) and later walks on its waters (14:22–33). He feeds more than five thousand people miraculously (14:13–21). Later, Jesus repeats this marvel with a crowd of over four thousand (15:32–39).

But there is another side to Matthew’s portrait of Jesus as the Messiah: he acts as a servant of others. The disciples must have been shocked when Jesus informed them they were not to be like rulers who “lord it over” others, but instead to serve, as he himself does: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (20:28). The last phrase specifies what lengths Jesus is willing to go to aid others. This Messiah will *die* to bring redemption to humanity.

It should not be surprising that this Son of David differs greatly from Israel’s expectation. But further, Matthew stresses not only that Jesus is the Messiah but that he is also the Son of God. While

the Gospel is clear about the fact that Jesus is fully a human being, Matthew also puts emphasis on his divine nature. At Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven proclaims, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17). Later in the Gospel, various people call Jesus God's Son, including the disciples, Peter, and finally the Roman centurion at the cross (27:54).

In summary, Matthew wants us to recognize in Jesus the long-hoped for Messiah, but one who will do much more than reign over Israel and the world. Jesus also brings redemption from human weaknesses and failures, as he sacrifices himself by dying on behalf of humanity and thus offering forgiveness of sins. This is the point of Jesus' words as he offers the cup at the Last Supper: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). Ultimately, Matthew affirms that the words of the prophet Isaiah point to Jesus' true identity as Messiah: "His name shall be called Emmanuel" (1:23; RSV).

The Life of Faith: Trust in the Lord of Life

In answer to a question about the greatest commandment, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (22:37). The answer is not surprising, because all Jews recognized this as their central affirmation of faith. The real surprise comes in Matthew's repeated emphasis that Jesus, as the Son of God, deserves the same honor as does God. Jesus' words in the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel confirm this: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (28:18). Then he instructs his followers to baptize "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This early Trinitarian formula makes it quite clear that faithfulness to God entails trusting in Jesus too.

Practically speaking, this means that not just the Father but Jesus too deserves worship and honor. Notice the parable of the Sheep and the Goats: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory" (25:31). When Matthew speaks of people in authoritative positions, he often pictures them as "sitting." The image recalls kings seated on thrones with petitioners standing or kneeling

before them. Thus, Matthew notes that, when Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount, he “sits down” (5:1). Further, we read that at the end of the age, “the Son of Man [will be] seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (26:64).

Matthew also emphasizes that we turn to Jesus as Messiah for forgiveness of sins. Then as now, people assumed only God can forgive sins. Yet Jesus claims that same power. In chapter 9:2–7, as he heals a paralyzed man, he says, “So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” Now, as Matthew emphasizes, Jesus not only forgives sins but brings about the possibility of forgiveness by his death. In Joseph’s dream at the beginning of the Gospel, the angel’s instructions are to “name him Jesus [e.g., “God saves”], for he will save his people from their sins” (1:21). Then, near the end of the Gospel, at the final Passover supper, Jesus explains how this will happen: his blood would be “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28).

Throughout the Gospel, Matthew stresses that trusting in Jesus offers comfort and security in an uncertain world. Noting the fragility of life, Jesus tells his hearers not to be anxious about food or clothing, concluding, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own” (6:34). Later, more personally, Jesus offers an invitation to take refuge in him: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (11:28–29). Ultimately, this promise is valid because of what Matthew emphasizes both at the beginning and end of this Gospel: Jesus is “Emmanuel,” and he “will be with us always.” These statements serve as bookends to this Gospel, and they summarize Matthew’s main message: Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, is with us always.

The Church: Confessing the Messiah in Current Culture

Faced with a trick question about Roman authority over God’s chosen people, Jesus responds with the well-known words, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (22:21; NASB). This Gospel, with other New Testament writings, does not question obedience to proper authorities. Still, Jesus’ subtle response challenges any human claim—even an emperor’s—to ultimate authority. God’s Messiah, Matthew

stresses, is the true king. Jesus affirms that “the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done” (16:27).

While this emphasis on supreme divine authority points most directly at dictators and autocrats, in our day it may also apply to an opposite tendency. Western culture emphasizes individualism to such a degree that it causes many to distrust any authority at all. Some common phrases in this view of things are: “All truth is relative,” or “Institutions cannot be trusted,” or “I’ll do it my way.” Obviously, the fact that the church has an institutional side makes it suspect in this environment. Unfortunately, misuse of authority in the church has too often given credence to doubt and suspicion.

Still, this Gospel proclaims that, in spite of failings in the church, there is such a thing as appropriate authority in our world. However, this authority does not reside in either human institutions or individuals. Rather, ultimate authority is found in God alone and in God’s Son, Jesus the Messiah. Facing such conflicting views about authority in our day, the church needs to adopt ways to proclaim allegiance to God, without—at the same time—appearing to be autocratic itself.

But then there is a further question: Is Jesus really who this Gospel claims? The religious authorities in Jesus’ day already asserted Jesus was a false teacher. Matthew was aware of a variety of accusations leveled at Jesus, and he sought to counter such denials at several points in this Gospel. His many statements that Jesus fulfills prophecies in the Scriptures provide indirect responses to these allegations. More explicitly, Matthew presents Joseph’s dream to indicate that Jesus’ birth is legitimate (1:20–22). Later, he notes that both Pilate and his wife, who has had a frightening dream, proclaim Jesus’ innocence (27:18–24). Then, when Jesus hangs dead on the cross, a Roman centurion adds his confirmation: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (27:54). And finally, with a hint of mockery, Matthew reminds his readers of the unlikely story put out by the religious leaders after the resurrection, alleging that the disciples had stolen Jesus’ body—even though the tomb was under guard (28:12–15).

Today, the popular position for many is that, far from being the Messiah, Jesus is simply one among several important religious

figures. This Gospel answers that assessment with the clear proclamation that Jesus, while very human, is himself also divine. He is Emmanuel, “God with us.” He is the Son of God. He is the One who “possesses all authority in heaven and on earth.” In consequence, for Matthew all who believe in and worship the Lord God, at least implicitly, also believe in and worship Jesus.

For Reflection and Action

1. The Eastern Orthodox Churches traditionally put particular emphasis on the “Jesus Prayer.” The full version reads: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Think about how these words fit with the emphases in Matthew’s Gospel. For the next week or so, try praying the prayer. Do they help to enrich your own spiritual life?
2. What difference does it make to you if you think of the title “Jesus Messiah” in place of “Jesus Christ”?
3. In ancient Israel, people connected closeness to God with the temple in Jerusalem. What do you think Jesus means when he says, “Something greater than the temple is here” (12:6)? How does this statement relate to your own understanding of and trust in Jesus?
4. Matthew applies several titles to Jesus as the Messiah, such as “Son of David,” “Son of Man,” and “Son of God.” How do you understand each of these, and do any of them speak to you specially?



Group Gatherings

Eva Stimson

Embracing Jesus as Messiah

Main Idea

Matthew presents Jesus as the long-hoped for Messiah, but one who will do much more than reign over Israel and the world. Jesus also brings redemption from human weaknesses and failures, as he sacrifices himself by dying on behalf of humanity and thus offering forgiveness of sins. We can trust him to be with us always.

Preparing to Lead

- Read and reflect on chapter 1, “Embracing Jesus as Messiah.”
- Review this plan for the group gathering, and select the questions and activities that you will use.
- What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Gathering

- Provide name tags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments for the next gathering.
- Agree on simple ground rules and organization (for example, time to begin and end; location for gatherings; welcoming all points of view; confidentiality; and so on). Encourage participants to bring their study books and Bibles.
- Review the gathering format: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

Opening Worship

Prayer (unison)

Gracious God, who created the world and all in it, we praise your name for your marvelous works, for stars and planets, for seas and

mountains, for us and all living creatures. That you created us in your very image is wonderful beyond words. In the face of our faults and failures, that you have sent your Son to redeem us is far more than we could ever imagine, much less deserve. At the beginning of this study, we ask that you grant us insight to understand Jesus' teachings more fully. Draw us closer to him, the Messiah, your own beloved Son. Amen.

Prayerful, Reflective Reading

- Read Matthew 11:25–30 aloud.
- Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and to reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite volunteers to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, Our Father . . .

Conversation

- Introduce chapter 1, “Embracing Jesus as Messiah.” Share observations, reflections, and insights.
- Review the Introduction (pp. 2–3), noting questions about the sources and authorship of Matthew. On a sheet of newsprint write “Messiah.” Add to the sheet other terms associated with Messiah (“Christ,” “anointed one,” “Son of David,” “Jesus”). Ask:

How did Jesus differ from the type of Messiah Israel expected?

- Review “A Basic Theme: What Sort of Messiah Is Jesus?” (pp. 3–4). Form three groups. Assign each group one of the following passages: Matthew 8:1–27; Matthew 11:25–12:14; and

Matthew 20:20–28. Have each group make a list of things the passage reveals about Jesus as Messiah. Share the lists. Add other names or descriptions of Jesus to the newsprint list started earlier (“healer,” “feeder,” “miracle worker,” “servant,” “Son of God,” “Emmanuel”).

- Review “The Life of Faith: Trust in the Lord of Life” (pp. 4–5). Key points:
 - a. Matthew repeatedly emphasizes that Jesus, as the Son of God, deserves the same honor as does God.
 - b. Jesus claims the same power as God to forgive sins, and his death brings about the possibility of forgiveness.
 - c. Trusting in Jesus offers comfort and security in an uncertain world; Jesus, the Messiah, is with us always.
- Review “The Church: Confessing the Messiah in Current Culture” (pp. 5–7). Ask:

How does Jesus challenge human claims to ultimate authority—in the Gospel of Matthew and in our world today? How do people today tend to view authority?

How can the church proclaim the authority of God and God’s Son, Jesus the Messiah, without appearing to be autocratic itself?

- Have participants pair up and discuss the fourth question in For Reflection and Action (p. 7), also considering other titles for Jesus that you have listed during this group gathering.

Conclusion

Invite participants to pray and reflect silently on the “Jesus Prayer,” as suggested in For Reflection and Action (p. 7).

Passing the Peace

The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.