MATTHEW 25:40 AND 'THE LEAST OF THESE': INTERPRETIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR A MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

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And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' ~ Matthew 25:40

Two approaches dominate the church's interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46 as it concerns the identity of "the least of these my brothers": a universal approach that considers Jesus' statement as establishing the way one treats the poor and needy as a (or even 'the') primary condition for salvation, in contrast to a particularist or narrow approach that rather understands Jesus as referring to how one receives the disciples sent in His name. In this study the various exegetical bases for these two dominant arguments will be examined in light of Matthew's thematic interests. That is, what are the dominant theological threads that run throughout Matthew's gospel, how does Matthew 25:40 cohere with other themes and emphases, and how does either interpretation fit with what the rest of the New Testament (NT) says about this subject. These are the questions this study will examine. In the end, I will propose that a narrow interpretation is most consistent with Matthew's theology and with that of the NT as a whole, where "the least of these my brothers" refers explicitly to cross-cultural missionaries. I will then draw out some general conclusions for a missional ecclesiology.

Keywords: Ecclesiology, Discipleship, Missions, Missio Dei, Missional, New Testament, Gospel of Matthew, Sheep and Goats, Compassion, Missionaries.

The Problem

The exegetical problem with this passage centers on two questions with varying degrees of difficulty. First, what is the identity of "all the nations" (Gr. *panta ta ethnē*)? That is, who exactly is it that will stand before the eschatological throne of judgment according to the opening verses of the pericope (vv. 31-33) and be divided into the righteous sheep and unrighteous goats? Second, and perhaps most crucially, who are "the least of these

my brothers"? Are they the poor of the world in general, or are they a narrower, more limited group? These are the questions to which we now turn.

A Brief History of Interpretation

The universalist approach that sees Jesus' statement about "the least of these my brothers" as referring to all the world's poor and needy finds wide acceptance among liberation and liberal theologies especially but may be gaining ground even among contemporary evangelicals (Luz 2005, 269). Several scholars believe that the universal approach is the most widely accepted view in the twentieth century (McMahon 2016, 560; Blomberg 1992, n.p.; Gray 1989, 255) though not everyone agrees (Keener 1997, 360). Interestingly, throughout most of church history, the narrow interpretation dominated. Sherman W. Gray has produced the most sustained analysis of various approaches to this text diachronically, examining many hundreds of sources from every epoch of church history from the apostolic fathers to the modern era. In his analysis, one constant difficulty proved to be that large numbers of interpreters were either neutral or ambiguous about the identity of the "least of these." That said, he finds that both the patristic era and medieval eras both tended heavily toward the narrower interpretation among those who articulated a specific position, while those in the neutral camp constitute the largest group. In fact, during the patristic period, which Gray measures as from the 2nd century to AD 750, of a total of 504 uses of the passage that he considered, most (62%) were neutral, while 33% favored the narrow view, and only 5% took the universalist view (Gray 1989, 338-39). In many cases, neutral positions can be attributed to the fact that the writer was simply not concerned with the identity of "the least of these my brothers" due to other, often apologetic, concerns. In the Middle Ages, "seventeen of twenty-one medieval authors" (or 80%), "who comment on vv. 40 and 45 see 'the least of these' as Christians" (Gray 1989, 340). Gray attributes the dominance of the narrow view in the Middle Ages in Western Christianity to the influence of Jerome and Augustine, while the east was more influenced by Chrysostom's more open views. Augustine, for example, refers to Matthew 25:31-46 114 times and yet never explicitly refers to "the least" as the world's poor; but more than a third of those references link this phrase to poor Christians (Gray, 69). Chrysostom's views are a bit more ambiguous, as he often understands "the least" as Christians only. But in other places he refuses to exclude non-believers. One might imagine then for exegetes like Chrysostom seeing something like concentric circles of need with believers being the inner circle and everyone else being the outer (Gray, 50-52). In the Renaissance and Reformation era, the numbers were strikingly similar (also at 80%), with twenty-nine of thirty-six authors endorsed the narrow interpretation, and two (5.5%) being neutral. This

preference for the narrower view held in the early modern era as not a single eighteenth-century author favored a universal interpretation. The nineteenth century saw a slight upsurge though, with 17% taking a universal approach while 19% can be classified as neutral (Gray 1989, 345-46). Explicit universal interpretations were the minority view for most of church history until the modern era when a dramatic shift took place (ibid., 348; cf. Blomberg, n.p.; Keener, 360). It does not require much imagination or creativity, therefore, to deduce that the dramatic departure from a narrow, restricted interpretation tends to line up fairly well with the emergence of the Enlightenment and liberal theologies.

The Arguments

Much of the difficulty in interpretating this passage lies in the challenge of identifying the various groups in view (Michaels 1965, 27). Specifically, two distinct groups feature prominently in the pericope: on one hand, we have "all the nations" (*panta ta ethnē*), who are subject to divine judgment, and on the other "the least of these my brothers" who are not among those being separated into the righteous sheep and unrighteous goats. The simplest answer is to see these two groups as simply the teachers (the disciples) and those being taught (Michaels, 30). Otherwise, if "the least of these my brothers" generally refers to the world's poor, you have the soteriological problem that all of them somehow escape the final judgment. This is because vv. 40 and 45 make it clear that "the least of these" are excluded from the separation process and from the ensuing judgment (Cope 1969, 37).

Those who take the narrow view also tend to argue this perspective based on the combination of the terms "least" (*elachistōn*) and "brothers" (*adelphōn*). "Least" is the superlative form of "little (ones)" (*mikroi*) "which without exception in Matthew refers to the disciples (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14)" while "brothers" always has the sense of "spiritual kin" (Blomberg, n.p.). Christopher McMahon objects to this reasoning by claiming that first, *elachistōn* and *mikroi* stand in contrast to one another, by which he seems to mean Matthew 25 and its reference to "least" (*elachistōn*) should be seen as an intentional departure from earlier references to the disciples as "little ones" (*mikroi*) since the precise terminology differs. Second, he notes that the use of "brothers" for disciples "might be mitigated by the fact that a 'non-ecclesial' use of the word is employed in Mt 5:22-24; 7:3-5" (McMahon, 560). I would argue, however, that classifying the word "brothers" in these instances as "non-ecclesial" may be technically correct but also anachronistic. Jesus surely intends the word "brothers" in the Sermon on the Mount to refer to the community of His followers (see Luz 2007, 204). Finally,

McMahon (2016) finds it inexplicable that those being subjected to judgment would not know how they had treated missionaries (560).

Frederick Bruner, a former missionary to the Philippines who came to understand his missionary calling in terms of "going down" via exegetical study rather than "going out" in evangelism and mission (Bruner 2004, Preface), also argues for an unrestricted and universal interpretation based on four characteristics of the passage:

> (1) the finality and universality of the setting of the text (last judgment, all nations, vv. 31-32); (2) the surprise of the righteous (vv. 37-39, in contrast to the intentional service of Christians or special people in 10:40-42); (3) the four lists of the needy, which provide the most accessible definitions of "the least" (vv. 35-36, 37-39, 42-43, 44); and (4) the context of the four concluding warning stories in Jesus' Sermon on the End of the World, the theme in each of which is the seriousness of the judgment for Christians, too (24:45-25:46; it would be unlike Matthew to end a discourse with a story that failed to complete and heighten the teaching of all his preceding stories; cf. the ending of each of Jesus' other sermons). (Bruner 2004, under "Chapter 25: The Sermon of Judgment")

In addition to the above arguments, Bruner also deals briefly with the question of a works-based salvation that follows from the universal interpretation. He admits that the universal approach comes very close to a salvation by works. In response, he cites "the deeply Evangelical Schlatter" who is simply not troubled by that conclusion (Bruner 2004, "Chapter 25"). In other words, some evangelicals seem to have just embraced the inevitable conclusion of a universal, works-based salvation as lying at the center of what Jesus teaches here. Ron Sider, for example, also takes this position (Sider 1993, 60-61). But Bruner's position is more complex, as he also cites Luther and Calvin as seeing in this passage salvation by grace and works of love made possible by that grace, with Luther then restricting such works only to the believer. Bruner rejects this limitation and argues that God's grace can even be at work in unbelievers to this end. He concludes:

> But now, in amazing magnanimity, this very Christ [who died on the cross] swings heaven's doors wide open to let in simple caregivers. Jesus' Sermon on the Last Judgment is his extended commentary on the Fifth Beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Jesus promises this, not a "liberal" Christianity. (Bruner 2004, under "Chapter 25")

Of McMahon and Bruner's take, I find McMahon's argument fairly easy to refute. While admittedly, the difference between "least" and "little ones" might be problematic if that were the only evidence suggesting the narrow view, the addition of "brothers" in the possessive form (these brothers of *mine*) combined with "least" greatly strengthens the argument that the disciples are in view. Regarding McMahon's final objection, the point is not that the nations would be ignorant of how they treated Christ's envoys (or missionaries), but that they would be ignorant of the fact that their acceptance or rejection of those missionaries amounted to acceptance or rejection of Christ, a point that echoes a statement made earlier by Jesus in Matthew 10:40 when he said to his disciples, "the one who receives you receives me, and the one who receives me receives Him who sent me." Anecdotally, it does not strike me at all as inconceivable that people would knowingly reject Christian missionaries and their message but remain in the dark about their simultaneous rejection of Christ. Many people who reject the gospel when shared by a missionary do so on the grounds that they consider missions itself to be an absurd endeavor in the modern world. How dare we claim that *only* our religion is true! I can recall a number of specific instances in my own life where people knew I was a missionary and rejected my efforts to share the gospel, often with sneers and laughter. I suspect they might potentially be surprised to one day learn that in doing so they rejected Christ.

As to Bruner's argument, I think his objections can readily be overcome if we consider two of the most often-cited arguments in favor of the narrower view. First, J. Ramsey Michaels has argued that Matthew 25:40 must be read in connection with Matthew 10. This is because both passages conclude important discourses by Jesus and have striking parallels. Matthew 10 concludes Jesus' missionary discourse to the disciples while Matthew 25 concludes Jesus' "farewell address." (Michaels 1965, 27-28). He also notes that in both pericopes, that (1) a specific group of people is in view, the "little ones" in Matthew 10 and "the least" in Matthew 25, (2) the two texts are linked in that the good works of Matthew 25 are linked to the phrase "a cold cup of water" in Matthew 10, and (3) both passages refer clearly to two groups of redeemed people. In chapter 10 "the little ones" are clearly the disciples (see 10:2-5, 42) and the other group of the redeemed are those who receive these (vs. 40), which explains why they are not subject to judgment. Thus:

> this parallel material in Matthew would suggest that in Matt. 25 "the least of these" are Jesus' disciples (specifically the Twelve) who stand in their Lord's place and proclaim the gospel, while the righteous "sheep" are those who gladly receive the word and demonstrate their faith by hospitality and works of love to the messengers. (Michaels 1965, 28)

Michaels goes on to point out not only the clear connection to Matthew 10 but also to the Great Commission passage, Matthew 28:19, which again contains the identical phrase, "all nations" (*panta ta ethnē*). Thus Matthew 25 presupposes the completion of Matthew 28:18-20, and disciples having been finally made of all nations. And, as even Bruner points out, the Great Commission should be understood as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. So, "the end of our Gospel connects with the beginning of our Bible" (Bruner, under "Chapter 25"). And as I've noted elsewhere, the whole gospel of Matthew is therefore bookended by references to the Abrahamic covenant and God's plan to bless the nations through Israel; thus, missions defined as taking the gospel to the nations constitutes a major theme for Matthew's Gospel (Ireland, *The Missionary Spirit*; Bruner, under "Chapter 25"). To not interpret Matthew 25 then along these lines seems strange to say the least.

Michaels also points out that there are several New Testament passages that support the narrow interpretation and show that this was how the early church understood these words. And the same can be said for perhaps the church's earliest discipleship document, *the Didache*. For example, *Did*. 4.1 and 4.5 both seem to reference Matthew 25 in general and possibly 25:40 specifically and admonish catechumens to support and receive their teachers in the faith as service to the Lord (Michaels, 31). In the New Testament, we see the narrow view of Matthew 25:40 played out when Paul and Silas are in prison and the jailer inquires about salvation. Paul and Silas share the gospel as Jesus' envoys; the jailer in return cares for their physical needs by attending to their wounds, proving them a meal in his home, and receives the gospel and is baptized. Thus the jailer is the righteous sheep in Matthew 25:40 and Paul and Silas "the least of these," Jesus' brothers. Michaels also argues that the commands to "watch" (vs. 42) and "be ready" (vs. 44) that lie at the center of two of the three parables in the closing verses of Matthew 24 and opening verses of Matthew 25 (i.e., the faithful slave and the parable of the talents), both have a general application to all believers but should especially characterize the actions of church leaders. Therefore,

> a prominent theme of Matt 24-25 is that of judgment, and in both these pericopes the ones being judged are those in positions of special trust. Unless all of this can be written off as merely part of the parabolic setting, it indicates that the Matthean context of 25:31-46 has "ecclesiastical" or "pastoral" as well as eschatological and missionary overtones.

While Gray in his exhaustive study of this passage did not find any explicit references among the apostolic fathers, what he did find was that without exception Christian charity in that era focused on the Christian community (Gray 1989, 11).

Similarly, Michaels points to clear references to Matthew 25:40 in the Second Epistle of Clement (2nd Century). Second Clement 17:3 in fact references all of the key themes discussed—all nations, obedience to Christ, final judgment, helping the weak as support for missionary endeavor, and obedience to church leaders, or elders (Michaels, 32).

Finally, Michaels argues that his thesis can only be proven based on how "the least of these my brothers," that is, the missionary disciples (or what Luz calls "the itinerant radicals"), relate to the deprivations of Matthew 25 elsewhere in the New Testament. The sufferings of Jesus through his missionary disciples are repeated several times in Matthew 25: hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison. Importantly, Paul's catalogue of apostolic hardships in 2 Corinthians 11:23 are strikingly similar. Here Paul testifies to having been imprisoned, hungry, thirsty, and a stranger—among other things. Paul refers to these as *the* characteristics of an apostle, thus agreeing with Matthew that "to watch" includes these things (Michaels, 33). Other direct parallels to these sufferings describing the characteristics of Christian missionaries are found in the 2nd Century Acts of John, 1 Corinthians 4:10-13, and the third century Acts of Thomas. This leads then to his conclusion that as it concerns the interpretation of Matthew 25, "Jesus' disciples are not so much called upon to 'help' the poor as they are to become the poor and outcast themselves in the completion of their world mission" (Michaels, 37).

To put it plainly, Michaels has answered all the objections raised by Bruner, and then some. To this argument, Lamar Cope offers additional important insight. He observes first (along with many other NT scholars) that the text should not be taken as a parable, even though it is commonly referred to as such. This is due to the directness of the imagery and unambiguous statements about the final judgment that would be out of step with a parable (Cope 1969, 34; cf. France 2007, 960; Luz 2005, 264). This is important, because were the passage considered a parable, then we might be inclined to not read too much into the various details and focus solely on a single overarching lesson. But Jesus does not present here an imaginary or invented story in order to advance a spiritual truth. He presents a true picture of how the nations will be judged.

In addition, Cope notes an additional connection to Matthew 10 that greatly strengthens the argument that Matthew 25 should be read in connection to that passage. In Matthew 10, Jesus clearly designates the disciples as his representatives, or more precisely, His prophets, and says that those who receive them receive the Lord, and those who provide a cold cup of water to the disciples "shall by no means lose their reward" (vv. 41-42). This seems to reflect an Old Testament theme in which showing hospitality to a prophet entitles the person to the prophet's reward. This appears to be the main idea in the rather bizarre story in 1 Kings 13:11-32, where a non-Israelite

prophet receives a prophet's reward, namely a revelation from YHWH, by showing hospitality to the disobedient prophet from Judah. So too in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, who shows hospitality to Elijah and is blessed with both material provision and with the resurrection of her son (Cope, 40-41). Therefore, given the Jewish background of Matthew 25, the explicit connections between the disciples as prophets and the eschatological judgment, which echoes common "Jewish motifs of judgment, agency, and hospitality," the narrower interpretation of this passage becomes almost certain. As Cope concludes

> Matthew 25:31-46 cannot provide a legitimate basis for Christian concern for the poor and needy of the world. Such an interpretation violates the text by eisegesis. "The least of these my brethren" are the disciples; the ethic is a churchly, sectarian one; it does not represent a significant advance in ethical thinking over the ethics of the Judaism of its day. For a wider concern and richer ethic interpreters must turn to other places in the New Testament. (Cope, 44).

Finally, should anything be made of the fact that vs. 45 omits the phrase "brothers of mine" and contains only "the least of these"? Does this impact the interpretation outlined above? Some argue, and I tend to agree, that the most likely reason for the omission lies in that Matthew had already made his point and despite contemporary confusion, "his understanding of it was clear and needed no further elucidation" (Luz 2005, 282). As France (2006) argues, "the omission of 'brothers and sisters' with reference to the 'smallest' in v. 45 is to be attributed to literary abbreviation rather than to any change in the identity of the people concerned, as the reader will naturally understand the phrase in the light of the fuller expression in v. 40" (996). That said, some do in fact see this as a broadening of the initial mandate to extend beyond fellow Christians to anyone in need (Noland 2005, 1034). Regardless though of how one interprets this latter verse, the emphasis of vs. 40 on caring for missionaries remains.

Mission in Matthew

David Baur has said that "along with Luke-Acts, [Matthew] is among the most explicitly missional books of the New Testament (Baur 2019, 241). If we examine Matthew's thematic interests and ask where and how the NT concept of mission fits into Matthew's gospel, a few important emphases emerge. First, as many commentators have observed, there is a certain duality at work in Matthew that at first seems contradictory. Matthew portrays Jesus as advocating both a ruthless particularism as it concerns Israel and a universalism regarding Gentiles (Harvey 1998, 120). But as Harvey observes, these

together "suggest that prominent among [Matthew's] purposes must have been (1) providing material to evangelize fellow Jews (cf. Matt. 10:23) and (2) explaining the origins of the Gentile mission (cf. Matt. 28:18-20)" (Harvey 120). Thus, missions, both to Israel and to the nations constitutes a major structural theme for Matthew's gospel.

What does it mean, then, to read Matthew missiologically? To answer this question, I am going to borrow insight from a sermon preached by Don Carson on this passage. As he rightly observes, Matthew 25 falls within what has been called Jesus' eschatological discourse—his sermon on the last things. Along these lines, Carson points out that each of the parables in the last half of Matthew 24 and beginning of Matthew 25 constitute Jesus' teachings on how to faithfully wait for Christ's return. Importantly, each parable builds on and increases the intensity of the previous one. For example, we wait knowing that the Master will return like a thief, when we don't expect it (24:43). Therefore, we also wait as stewards knowing that we must give an account of our service (24:46). We also wait as those who understand that the Master's return may be long delayed, as emphasized in the parable of the ten virgins (25:1-13). Finally, we wait knowing that while we do not know the time of the Master's return, and while we know that the master may be delayed, we are tasked with improving or expanding the Master's assets, as seen in the parable of the talents (25:14-30; Don Carson, "The Parable of the Sheep and Goats").

Carson then moves on to the pericope of the sheep and goats and concludes that, in the end, we wait for the Master by caring for our fellow Christians. But based on the missiological paradigm outlined above, I suggest moving beyond Carson and concluding that we wait, preeminently by remaining engaged in Jesus' mandate to take the gospel to all nations. This is because the "least of these my brothers" are not Christians in general, but as Keener argues, Christian missionaries specifically (Keener 2009, 605). And how the nations (i.e., people groups) receive them proves determinative regarding their eternal status. The church then must wait by engaging in mission to the lost, considering this our greatest form of stewardship. It is for the nations, after all, that Jesus went to the cross. *They*, the *panta ta ethnē* are the Lord's most precious asset (1 Peter 2:9) and it is for their sake that we must remain fully engaged in the *missio Dei* until the Lord's return.

The Narrow View and its Implications for a Missional Ecclesiology

If we adopt the universal interpretation of this passage, its worth asking what we gain in doing so? First, we embrace, at some level a soteriology that is at odds with the rest

of the New Testament and the doctrine of justification by faith. We might, by embracing this interpretation find an answer to the ever-challenging question of those who have never heard the gospel (that is, they are saved through Christ based on their good deeds toward humanity). Bruner argues this in his commentary on Matthew. And we get an affirmation of Christian social concern that is completely compatible with the rest of Scripture. Which means that if we adopt the narrow interpretation of Matthew 25:40, we lose nothing in terms of our ecclesiology. There are plenty of passages in Scripture in both the OT and NT that instruct God's people to be generous toward the poor and needy among us (to name just a few, see Ex. 23:6; Deut. 15:4; Psalm 9:9, 109:31; Matthew 19:21; Mark 12:40; Luke 4:18, 14:13; Gal. 2:10; James 2:2-6, etc.). There is no need therefore to treat these options as mutually exclusive and to think that a narrow interpretation of Matthew 25:40 will somehow diminish the biblical basis for Christian compassion. And perhaps no passage better captures the narrow interpretation of our passage *and* the broader need to be generous to the poor, whoever and wherever they are, than Paul's admonition in Galatians 6:10: "So then, while we have opportunity, let's do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." So, the expectation that God's people will demonstrate a constant and sacrificial concern for the least well off among us is fully compatible with a biblical ethic, a specifically Christian ethic, and is certainly consistent with even a narrower Matthean ethic (Matt. 6:2; 19:21). Yet that does not seem to be what Jesus is teaching here in 25:40. Therefore, if we adopt the broader universal interpretation we stand to lose a critical statement by Jesus, found nowhere else in the Gospels, about the importance of the missionary enterprise and the support of missionaries by church leaders and local congregations. Given the great commission passage as the final word of Jesus in Matthew, this narrower missionary interpretation seems to best fit Matthew's overall theological framework. From this, then, several important points regarding a missional ecclesiology can be deduced.

1. *The support of missionary evangelists is not optional*. We live in a church age in which missions in the local church, is frankly, a mess. I know from my time as a missionary with the Assemblies of God, that most local churches have no formal strategy for what missionaries to support (if any), or any clearly articulated bases on whom they should or shouldn't support. Consequently, money is more often than not given to programs that are "sexy"—by which I mean, those that pull people's heart strings and leave people feeling that they've done something important on the world stage, just long enough for them to return to their lives of rampant consumerism and materialism, guilt free. Often its humanitarian aid-type projects that raise the most funds, and often-repeated statistics on missions giving have supported this fact for decades. It is a widely

known fact in missionary circles that giving to missionaries working among the unreached is an embarrassingly small portion of overall Christian giving in general and an even smaller portion of giving to global causes (see Status of Global Christianity). For most churches, missions strategy is broad and scattered. For most the strategy is, as my friend Alan Johnson once described it, "go everywhere, do everything, all at once." In fact, as a direct result of this shotgun approach to giving, world missionaries are increasingly having a difficult time raising money to get to foreign fields. Could this be a direct result of poor exegesis and the misguided preaching of Matthew 25:40? I think there's a good chance this is at least part of the problem. After all, when was the last time you heard a sermon on this passage that was fundamentally about missions support in a way that tied directly to Matthew 25:40? I, for one, have never heard a sermon on this text along those lines and yet there are very good reasons for believing that this is precisely the intent of the passage.

2. *Missionaries should expect to suffer*. When missions is understood rightly as proclaiming the Gospel to those who have never heard, then we would expect that missionaries would find themselves in the midst of terrible hardships and deprivations, as did the apostle Paul. But when we define missions as anything that we do across geographic borders, even if it's just sending a shipping container laden with mosquito nets or used clothes, then it's not hard to imagine why we have difficulty conceiving of missions as suffering; if our missions involvement begins and ends with us sitting in our Lazy-boy and tapping a few buttons on our smartphone in order to donate our spare change, we may be inclined to gloss over any biblical suggestion that missions means suffering for those who go. Perhaps we seldom encounter such hardships as those mentioned in Matthew 25 because we've surrendered our prophetic role and therefore challenge no one regarding their religious commitments and call no one to account. What do I mean? If most of our missionary endeavors are to those nations where the gospel has already taken root, where 75% or more of the population are already Christians, then its likely we won't experience the sufferings like those described by Paul because we're not truly being good stewards as we wait for Christ's return. We're squandering resources by choosing to go to easy places rather than hard places. Because when we do those things, when we go to those places where Jesus is not known, then Scripture makes it abundantly clear that persecution and suffering and imprisonment and death may follow. And because of this, those engaged in this kind of dangerous and costly work deserve the church's utmost commitment and unwavering support *because Jesus commands it!* Pastors and church members must find motivation for that support by seeing it as being done for Christ himself.

3. *Leaders must disciple their churches in a missional ecclesiology.* Therefore, the church must be discipled according to the pattern of Matthew 25:40. This should minimally include 1) the certainty of Christ's return, 2) the judgment of the nations based on their acceptance or rejection of the missionaries' message, and 3) the absolute responsibility of every local church for the ongoing commitment and support to "the least of these my brothers"—otherwise known as cross-cultural missionaries. Church leaders (*the presbuteros*) have a divine mandate to make sure that their churches understand and follow the pattern of Matthew 25:40. None of this is to even remotely suggest that the church should stop giving to charitable organizations at home and abroad. But I do recommend that the proper understanding of Matthew 25:40 should call us to a more biblical balance than we are perhaps accustomed to.

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