

Come Let us Reason Together:
Developing Common Understandings for Discernment

The Rule of Christ in His Church

“Binding and Loosing” as Ethical Discernment
in Matthew’s Gospel

Overview/Table of Contents

I.	The Rule of Christ, the World and the Church.....	2
II.	The Rule of Christ, Moses and the Rabbis.....	3
III.	The Rule of Christ, Binding and Loosing.....	4
IV.	The Rule of Christ, Radical and Merciful.....	5
V.	The Rule of Christ, Yesterday and Today.....	6
VI.	The Rule of Christ, the Church and Homosexuality.....	7
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	Appendix A: A Structure of Matthew’s Gospel.....	8
	Appendix B: Matthew’s Re-narration of Key Themes.....	9
	Appendix C: Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate.....	10
	Bibliography.....	11
	End Notes.....	12-16

I. The Rule of Christ, the World and the Church

Matthew's Gospel climaxes with the crucified-risen Lord proclaiming to his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."¹ In other words, the kingdom of heaven has come and is coming; the rule of Christ has begun!²

"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And look, I am with you always to the very end of the age."³

This is hardly an arbitrary Easter ending. For if Easter means that Jesus has become the true Ruler of the world, then it is now time for us to go in the power of his Spirit and call the world to give him their whole hearted allegiance and learn to live in his ways.

After all Easter is not news about going to a different world, but the good news that this world is now, and will be, different. Easter is a new beginning of God's project, not to snatch people away from earth to heaven, but to colonize earth with the life of heaven.

So Matthew's Gospel ends telling us that colonies of the King are to be formed among the nations by those whom Jesus has disciplined. Accompanied by his presence, he commands us to go make disciples by means of two activities: baptizing and teaching.⁴

Of course baptism is the means by which people are initiated into the "Body [-politic]" of the Messiah in the name of the Triune God. By it we participate in a Divine-human communion; an alternative society living among the nations under the rule of Christ.⁵

Accompanying baptism, we are to make disciples by teaching people to obey Jesus' commandments. His commands are to shape the way of life of the Body [-politic] living under his rule.⁶

So the missional actions of baptism and teaching are complimentary. To be baptized is to be initiated into the rule of Christ and his commandments are concrete instances of that rule that form the character and life of the community.

Through baptism and teaching the church becomes a witness to the faithfulness of Israel's God who keeps his promise to bring his saving rule to the world. God is reconciling humanity to God's self and each other - Jew and Gentile alike - in the Body [-politic] of the Messiah.⁷

The church then, is the world under the powers of redemption; the place where the true hope of the world is being worked out. We quite literally embody a witness to life lived under the rule of Christ.

In Jesus' opening sermon of this Gospel he made this intention clear, "You are the light of the world, a city set on a hill cannot be hidden... Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify the Father in heaven."⁸

II. The Rule of Christ, Moses and the Rabbis

Now Jesus' final exhortation, "...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...", points us back to the extended blocks of Jesus' teaching that Matthew has inserted into his narrative of the life of Jesus.⁹

Matthew has inserted five "sermons" in all: The Sermon on the Mount (5-7); The Sermon on Mission (10); The Sermon on the Kingdom (13); The Sermon on Community (18); and The Sermon on Judgment (23-25).¹⁰

It has long been noted that Matthew has an interest in portraying Jesus as a second Moses.¹¹ Like Moses, Jesus is the savior and law-giver of his people. And this suggests that these five sermons generally intend to bring the teachings of the five books of Moses to fulfillment.¹²

This conclusion is made explicit in the inaugural and agenda setting Sermon where Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."¹³

Israel's understanding is that YHWH rules *through his word* in both creation and redemption.¹⁴ So here Jesus' embodiment of his teaching and teaching ministry are a means of revealing and bringing the Kingdom of heaven.

So the rule of Christ is mediated through his life and commandments. He teaches God's people how to live in light of the coming of the Messiah and his kingdom. Jesus in a new and authoritative way teaches us how to embody Israel's Torah in the time of its fulfillment.¹⁵

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus' interpretation and observance of the Law is set in contrast to the interpretation and observance of the Law by the Scribes (and Pharisees).¹⁶ Put more strongly, they are at strident odds on this matter.¹⁷

So in the first Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes issue with the Scribes' *interpretation* of the Law, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the...Scribes you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven...You have heard it said...but I say to you."¹⁸

And in the final Sermon on the Judgment, Jesus takes issue with the Scribes' *practice* of the Law. In a chapter long rant he pronounces seven woes on them peppered with some serious name calling – "you hypocrites,...fools,...blind guides,...whitewashed tombs,...snakes!"¹⁹

What gives Jesus the authority to say such things? For Matthew, Jesus' authoritative interpretation and practice of the Law is rooted in his identity. Jesus possesses authority because he is a matchless manifestation of God's presence, the unique Son of God, the Messiah.²⁰

So if Mark's Jesus has authority over the world of the demonic; if Luke's Jesus has the authority to bring an end-time Jubilee to our world; then Matthew's Jesus has an authority even greater than that of Moses to embody and interpret YHWH's commands.²¹

III. The Rule of Christ, Binding and Loosing

Now in two passages in Matthew's Gospel Jesus promises to share his authority with, and exercise his authority through, his church. The first is addressed to Peter and the second to the Twelve.²²

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."²³

"Truly, I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."²⁴

Just as Jesus' authority to interpret God's will is rooted in his Messianic identity, so the church's share in his authority is anchored in her confession of Jesus, "as the Christ, the Son of the living God;" as well as his presence, "wherever two or three are gathered in his name."²⁵

In the context of both of these passages we also have the only two texts where Jesus explicitly refers to the "church." It seems that for Matthew, exercising the Rule of Christ is a fundamental characteristic of the church.²⁶

So while our tradition, like others, has seen abuses of the Rule of Christ, we cannot seek a solution for malpractice in non-practice. For Matthew considers binding and loosing to be an essential aspect of the church's mission on earth.²⁷

Both of these passages describe the church's exercise of the Rule of Christ in terms of the practice of "binding and loosing." Apparently Matthew assumes his readers know the meaning of this practice.

And in fact the practice was used in Jesus' and Matthew's day to refer to the judicial rulings and judgments of rabbis.²⁸ They "bound" the Law when they determined that a commandment was applicable to a particular situation and they "loosed" it when it was not.²⁹

There are two aspects to the meaning of these terms: forgiveness and moral discernment.³⁰ Matthew's usage reflects both meanings and indeed it has been argued that the two meanings are inseparable.³¹ (His overall usage emphasizes moral discernment.)

So for example Matthew 18 envisions an ecclesial process where there is an attempt to restore a wayward sinner. But it also is a process by which the community of Christ engages in ethical discernment.³²

Matthew 18 envisions a local congregation determining the application of Scriptural commandments for contemporary situations in prayerful communion with the risen Christ. And of course we have gathered to extend this practice here and to do so in an intra-church setting.³³

IV. The Rule of Christ, Radical and Merciful

Matthew's Gospel gives us numerous examples of the binding and loosing of the Law from which we can learn to become Christian Scribes trained for the kingdom.³⁴ With the time we have we can't attend to all of them, but we can try to trace their basic trajectory.³⁵

We begin where Jesus gives us his own agenda for his practice of binding and loosing of the Law. When asked by the Scribes which is the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus responds with the commands to love God and neighbor.³⁶

Then, in a remark unique to Matthew, Jesus adds, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."³⁷ Matthew's use of "hang" corresponds to a rabbinical formula denoting the exegetical ruling (a *Halakah*) from a given portion of Scripture.³⁸

Consequently, "...the double love commandment expresses the purpose and unity of scripture and, in so doing, constitutes a hermeneutical norm: all of scripture should be interpreted and practiced in accord with the double love command."³⁹

So Jesus teaches us that love of God and neighbor is our basic hermeneutic for the practice of binding and loosing. And there are two primary arcs of interpretation that flow from this hermeneutic in Matthew's Gospel: one radical, the other merciful.⁴⁰

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus' interpretation of the Law is contrasted with that of the Scribes' as a way of revealing the fulfillment of the Law and a surpassing righteousness. He does this by means of six epi-thesis,⁴¹ "You have heard that it was said...but I tell you..."⁴²

Here Jesus radically "binds" various Laws to particular circumstances by drawing out their full intent and defining their applicability.⁴³ More particularly, Jesus presses past the external limits of the Scribes to show the Law's claim on the whole character of the person.⁴⁴

So the Law is rightly interpreted as a surpassing righteousness that is disposed "toward reconciliation, not anger; toward purity, not lust; toward faithfulness, not divorce; toward truthfulness not deceit; toward peace, not revenge; toward uncalculating love, not reciprocity."⁴⁵

Along side of this hermeneutic of radical love, Matthew characterizes Jesus as working with a hermeneutic of merciful love.⁴⁶ On two different occasions Jesus "looses" the Law by citing Hosea 6.6, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."⁴⁷

In these disputes about eating with sinners (purity laws) and harvesting grain (Sabbath laws) we see the outworking of Jesus' interpretation of the Law as understood in terms of what he elsewhere calls, "the weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faith."⁴⁸

So while the Scribes, "tie up (bind!) heavy loads and put them on people's shoulders;" Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest...for I am gentle and humble in heart...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."⁴⁹

V. The Rule of Christ, Yesterday and Today

Since Matthew's Gospel as Scripture speaks authoritatively to the church, how does it shape our practice of the Rule of Christ as envisioned in Matthew 16 & 18? Let's summarize them section by section. (The footnotes elaborate on additional contemporary significance.)

The Rule of Christ, the church and the world.

- The Rule of Christ is practiced in the context of the coming of the kingdom of heaven through Jesus Christ, who has become Lord through his life, death and resurrection.⁵⁰
- The Rule of Christ is practiced in the context of the mission of Christ to the world through his church.⁵¹
- The Rule of Christ is practiced by the church living as an alternative community amid the nations who live under other rulers and lords.⁵²

The Rule of Christ, Moses and the Rabbis

- Jesus' authority to teach God's commandments is rooted for Matthew in his Christology.⁵³
- Jesus is a second Moses who mediates God's rule through his authoritative teaching of God's commandments in this time of their fulfillment.⁵⁴
- Jesus' dispute with the Scribes over the interpretation of the Law displays the beginning of an alternative society within Israel and eventually the Gentile nations.⁵⁵

The Rule of Christ, Binding and Loosing

- Jesus' authority to bind and loose is shared with his church as a means through which he continues to exercise his rule as the crucified-risen Lord.⁵⁶
- Binding and loosing is an essential characterization of the church for Matthew. We cannot seek a solution for malpractice in non-practice.⁵⁷
- Binding and loosing make reference to the practice of communal forgiveness and especially to ethical discernment regarding the Scriptures.⁵⁸

The Rule of Christ, Radical and Merciful

- Matthew's Jesus binds and looses the Law by appealing to the priority of specific parts of the Law, the hermeneutical norm of love for God and neighbor.⁵⁹
- An appropriate interpretation and performance of Scripture requires that *we* love God and neighbor.⁶⁰
- Jesus' embodiment and use of the hermeneutical norm of love leads him to bind the Law in both a radical manner as well as loose it in a merciful manner.⁶¹

Finally, for Matthew our practice of the Rule of Christ is to be subsumed under discipleship to Jesus for, "...the ethic of the Gospel is an ethic of adherence to this man as he has bound our destiny to his, and as he makes the story of our life his story."⁶²

VI. The Rule of Christ, the Church and Homosexuality

The R/rule of Christ, the R/rule of love as embodied in Christ, provides the definitive frame for the church's discernment and practice of Scripture. What does Matthew have to teach us as we make Scriptural discernments regarding monogamous same sex unions?⁶³

First, Matthew shows us that it is not necessarily a violation of Scripture to allow for exceptions to normative Scriptural statements.⁶⁴ So might monogamous same-sex relationships be an exception to the Scriptural prohibitions against homosexuality?

The church has been given a share in the authority of Christ to prayerfully make just such judgments. And we can do so with the confidence that comes from the promise of the presence of the risen Lord is in our midst.

Second, how does Jesus' interpretation of Scripture as described by Matthew in terms of a radical and merciful hermeneutic of love inform our discernment regarding monogamous same sex unions?

Of course this hermeneutic will not give us an obvious straightforward answer – if it did, we wouldn't be here!⁶⁵ But it can set trajectories.⁶⁶ In binding and loosing there are no easy formulas; the process requires Spirit lead creativity and judgment.

Third, if Matthew's Jesus is the fulfillment and goal of the Law, then he is normative for our interpretation and performance of both the Hebrew Scriptures⁶⁷ and any post-canonical claim of a further or newer revelation.

So, for example, if God is doing a new thing by shedding his grace on monogamous same sex unions, then it will need to be shown, "how this revelation is to be judged *vis-a-vis* the unsurpassability of the revelation of Christ."⁶⁸

Fourth, if Matthew's Jesus treats Scripture as expressing the divine voice and will down to the details, can we justify using the hermeneutics of higher criticism to dismiss texts on homosexuality?⁶⁹

"...traditional hermeneutics knew nothing of historical criticism, although similar questions...were asked, but they were always submitted to the overarching conviction that the Scriptures could be trusted to express the divine voice and will".⁷⁰

There are no doubt other lessons to tease out of Matthew's Gospel. But it is only appropriate for the final Word to have the last word tonight. And that word is one both of warning and promise.

"Anyone who looses one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."⁷¹

Appendix A: The Structure of Matthew's Gospel

Story: 1-4	Teaching: 5-7	Story: 8-9	Teaching: 10	Story: 11-12	Teaching 13
Jesus' Birth	Sermon on the Mount	Jesus' Authority	Sermon on Mission	Jesus' Rejection	Sermon on the Kingdom

Story: 14-17	Teaching: 18	Story: 19-22	Teach. 23-25	Story 26-28
Jesus' Miracles	Sermon on Community	Jesus' Journey to J.	Sermon on Judgment	Jesus' death/resurrection

Appendix B: Matthew's Re-narration of Key Themes

Three reoccurring topics in the following discussion are authority, love and teaching. All three have been re-narrated by Matthew's Gospel in terms of Jesus' way of the cross. This re-narration has a significant impact on our understanding of these themes.

A. The Cruciform Nature of Authority in Matthew (21, 23)

Jesus' authority is rooted in his identity as the manifestation of God's presence, the unique Son of God, the Messiah.⁷² Note that Jesus' identity *is his relationship* to God and Israel in these descriptions.

Jesus' relationship to the Father and Israel is self-giving love which *culminates in the cross* through which we are brought into communion with the Triune God and one another. This is Jesus' authority.

And this is the nature of the authority Christ shares with and exercise through the church in the Rule of Christ. The Rule of Christ is the rule of love. Love is the power behind all legitimate authority rooted in the eternal love of the Triune God.

B. The Cruciform Nature of Love in Matthew

The nature of love, like authority, is re-narrated in Matthew's Gospel. The commandment to love God and neighbor is not to be understood as some generalized conception of love, inclusiveness or tolerance.

Rather it is understood as our appropriate response to the love of a particular God's love for us as revealed in Israel and consummately in Jesus Christ *and his cross*. Richard Hays says it succinctly,

"The content of the word 'love' is given fully and exclusively in the death of Jesus on the cross; apart from this specific narrative image, the term has no meaning... We can recover the power of love only by insisting that love's meaning is to be discovered in... Jesus' ...cross."⁷³

C. The Cruciform Nature of Teaching/Learning in Matthew

Our Modern modes of learning regularly suppose that teaching and knowing are separable from embodiment, i.e. discipleship. Consequently teaching easily falls into cogitation and information rather than training in the ways of righteousness *which is self-giving love*.

Matthew's Gospel displays this problem and the solution by contrasting the Scribes and Jesus. The Scribes are hypocritical, i.e. duplicitous, whereas Jesus is "whole," his life and his teaching are one.

We are called through baptism and discipleship to share in Christ's wholeness. By following Jesus (an embodied learning) we learn to live in his ways. We learn to follow him in *the way of the cross*.

Appendix C: Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate

In his book *“Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate,”* Charles Cosgrove identifies five hermeneutical “rules” that modern Western Christians tend to assume when appealing to Scripture in debates over matters like homosexuality.

Cosgrove says, “The identification and explication of these rules should, at the very least, reveal why arguments sometimes work and sometime don’t, showing the gaps in assumptions that make us sometimes talk past each other.”⁷⁴

The “rules” Cosgrove identifies are not to be understood as normative but descriptive of the way we appeal to Scripture.⁷⁵ What follows is a list of those rules and examples of how they might be operative in our discernment in regard to homosexuality.

1. The Rule of Purpose: The purpose (or justification) behind a biblical moral rule carries greater weight than the rule itself.

E.g. Why does Scripture prohibit homosexuality at least in some or all instances?⁷⁶

2. The Rule of Analogy: Analogical reasoning is an appropriate and necessary method for applying scripture to contemporary moral issues.

E.g. In what ways are scriptural descriptions of homosexuality analogous or non-analogous to our modern notions of the homosexuality and sexual orientation?⁷⁷

3. The Rule of Countercultural Witness: Greater weight is given to countercultural tendencies in scripture than those tendencies that echo the dominant culture of the time.

E.g. Do we believe that monogamous same sex unions should be welcomed in the church because they are representative of the powerless and the marginalized?⁷⁸

4. The Rule of the Nonscientific Scope of Scripture. Scientific (or empirical) knowledge stands outside the scope of scripture.

E.g. How do we relate our understanding of homosexuality in terms of modern science and personal experience to Scriptural texts on this topic?⁷⁹

5. The Rule of Moral-Theological Adjudication. Moral-theological considerations should guide hermeneutical choices between conflicting plausible interpretations.

E.g. How does the rule of faith and the rule of love inform our discernment of the propriety of monogamous same sex unions?⁸⁰

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End Notes

¹ Matthew 28.18

² I will be using “the rule of Christ” to refer more generally to Christ’s dominion and “Rule of Christ” to refer to Christ dominion through the church by means of the practice of fraternal admonition.

³ Matthew 28.19-20

⁴ Matthew’s ending with its emphasis on baptizing and teaching suggests to many that he was intending to write a catechism for the church. In other words, Matthew’s Gospel not only calls us to catechize the nations, but it is itself a catechism for the nations. Furthermore to read Matthew’s gospel - and to be read by it, is to be formed as disciples. This is significant for our overall discussion because impasses in the interpretation of Scripture cannot be settled by method alone. Interpretive questions involve ethical judgments which require a community of character. See Stephen Fowl’s two books on Scripture, “*Reading in Communion*” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) and “*Engaging Scripture*” (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

⁵ This society is an “alternative” society because it confesses and lives under another Lord. At root the broader issue here is true and false worship, idols or the living God. Those living under the rule of Christ seek an evangelical non-conformity to the world that does not yet recognize his rule and so still serves other gods.

⁶ Matthew sees moral action as both organically growing out character (7:15-20; 12.24; 12.33-34) as well as obedience to the commandments as interpreted by Jesus. Richard Hays writes, “Matthew gives no systematic account of the matter, but the solution to the puzzle is probably to be sought along the following lines. Action flows from character, but character is not so much a matter of innate disposition as of training in the ways of righteousness. Those who respond to Jesus’ preaching and submit to his instruction will find themselves formed in a new way so that their action will, as it were, ‘naturally’ be wise and righteous. They will learn the skills and discernments requisite to living faithfully.” (1996:99) For the cruciform nature of learning, See Appendix “B.”

⁷ Matthew’s Gospel is commonly understood as situated in Second Temple and post-Temple Judaism (See especially Davies, W.D. 1964. *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). A critical question that comes up early in the church’s mission, and is pertinent to our study, is how the Gentiles will relate to the Jewish Law in the context of the one body-politic of the Messiah. The short answer for Matthew would seem to be that the nations/Gentiles are to be taught to keep the Law in the time of its fulfillment as brought and taught by Jesus. (see also fnnt. 13 below.)

⁸ Matthew 5.14-17. Here Jesus ascribes to his disciples the vocation of Israel in general and the city of Jerusalem in particular.

⁹ See Appendix A. Matthew writes his Gospel with an alternating pattern of narrative (story) and discourse (teaching). By this Matthew’s way of structuring his Gospel corresponds to the ending and goal of his Gospel. So Matthew narrates the life of Jesus, and at the end we are told to make disciples by baptizing people so that they might participate in this life. And Matthew records Jesus’ teachings and then at the end we are told that we are to make disciples by, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” This pattern also helps us see that in Matthew’s understanding of the Christian life, grace (baptism) and law (commandments) are complimentary.

¹⁰ It should also be noted that all five “sermons” end on the theme of eschatological judgment. And the fifth and climatic discourse is given over entirely to this theme, culminating in the Son of Man’s judgment of the nations. This shows us that eschatology is a strong warrant for Matthew’s ethics.

¹¹ For a summary of the evidence see Allison 1993, pp. 140-165.

¹² Matthew marks the end of each of these five sections with the formula, “When Jesus had finished these words...” This also underscores the Moses typology (c.f. Deut. 31.1, 32.45).

¹³ Matthew 5.17(-21). In Matthew Jesus fulfills the Law in two fundamental ways corresponding to his structure of narrative and discourse. First, he fulfills the Law by his life (narrative). Matthew notes more than a dozen times that Jesus life is a typological fulfillment of O.T. prophecies and stories (e.g. 1.22-23; 2.5-6; 2.15, etc.). Secondly, he interprets what it means to fulfill the Law through his authoritative teaching (discourse).

¹⁴ E.g. Genesis 1, Exodus 20.

¹⁵ See Matt. 7.28-29 for the first programmatic statement of this theme.

¹⁶ Frank Matera provides a nice summary, “Matthew sees the behavior of the religious leaders as a mirror image of that practiced by Jesus. They are hypocritical and guilty of lawlessness (anomia); Jesus is single-minded in his devotion to God and practices righteousness (dikaioosyne). The hypocritical behavior of the religious leaders merits condemnation, whereas Jesus’ righteous behavior will result in eschatological vindication.” (*New Testament Ethics*, Louisville: Westminster, 1996:56)

¹⁷ Students of Matthew's Gospel suggest that this conflict reflects Matthew's own historical setting. For example, "Matthew's Christian community was engaged in a struggle with the representatives of emergent rabbinic Judaism, each side claiming to represent the authentic interpretation of the Torah and Israel's traditions." (Hays 1996:107)

¹⁸ Matthew 5.20ff.

¹⁹ Matthew 23. Unlike the Scribes, Jesus' commandments and form of life are one.

²⁰ Matthew 1.23; 3.17; 11.27; 17.5; etc; but finally the passage that opened this paper where the crucified-risen Lord says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (28.18) Note that in each of these passages Jesus' identity is located in relation to God and Israel. This becomes significant for understanding the cruciform nature of Jesus' authority. See Appendix "B."

²¹ A fascinating remark in this regard comes as Jesus addresses the crowds and his disciples regarding the teachers of the Law in Matthew 23. "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. ... Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ." Jesus is the one true Rabbi/Teacher of Israel!

²² What follows assumes the readers' familiarity with the context of these passages. Again the nature of Jesus' authority that he shares with us is love. See Appendix "B."

²³ Matthew 16.19. The church's share in the Messiah's authority is described metaphorically as "keys." "By interpreting God's will rightly, the church opens the door for God's will to be done and hence, for God's rule to become a lived reality. (Powell: 2003:443) Later Jesus will point out that the teachers of the Law are exercising the authority of Moses (23.2) in precisely the opposite direction. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to." (Matt. 23.13)

²⁴ Matthew 18.18. The concern in Matthew 16.19 is the *establishment* of the church's share in the Messiah's authority. Here the concern is with *how* the church will exercise its share in the Messiah's authority.

²⁵ In terms of our overall theme it is important to note that this promise echoes a rabbinic tradition about the study of the Torah, "If two sit together and words of the Law [are spoken] between them, the Divine Presence rest between them." (m.Aboth 3.2)

²⁶ See Powell (2003:438) and Yeago (1999:95ff). For our present concerns we should be reminded that the word "church" has an antecedent in the "qahal" of Israel gathered at Sinai *to be given the Law*. And in the Greek world it usually meant an assembly of citizens *gathered for decision making*, a town meeting.

²⁷ As already noted, if the church is to fulfill the commission given to it, the baptized must be called to live under the gracious rule of Christ and learn to live in loving obedience to his commandments.

²⁸ Debates over the applicability of the Law were common and were eventually codified in the Mishnah.

²⁹ "It is important to note that for the rabbis (and for Matthew) loosing the law never meant dismissing scripture or countering its authority. The law was never wrong when it was rightly interpreted. The issue, rather, was discernment of the law's intent and of the sphere of its application." (Powell 2003:439)

³⁰ See Yoder (1985:213-215), Powell (2003:438-441), and *Abington Bible Dictionary* 1.743-745. A third possible meaning that has been suggested is the binding and loosing of demons (e.g. see Hiers, Richard H. 1985.

"'Binding' and 'Loosing': The Matthean Authorizations." JBL 104/2, pp. 233-250).

³¹ See Yoder 1985:215. Many of the N.T. Epistles describe the church practicing both of these dimensions of the Rule of Christ: e.g. Gal. 6.1-2; James 5.19-20; I Cor. 5:6ff; 6.1ff; etc.

³² "For Matthew, the issue is the identification of sin... for Matthew the problem is ethical discernment (and the lack of respect for the church's role in this) rather than mere obstinacy" (Powell: 2003:439).

³³ In terms of Matthew, the question is the relationship of the reference to "church" in Matthew 16 - which is presumably a reference to the "universal" church; and the reference to "church" in Matthew 18 - which is presumably a reference to the "local" church. This move needs to be mapped out by an ecclesiology that can speak to how authority is understood beyond the level of the local church. For an example of such an attempt in the Free Church tradition, see Miroslav Volf's "*After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). For an Anabaptist engagement with Volf see A. James Reimer's "*Mennonites and the Church Universal: A Critical Engagement with Miroslav Volf*" in *Without Spot or Wrinkle* ed. by Koop and Scherts (Occasional Papers 21, Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000).

³⁴ "[Jesus] said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." (Matt. 13.52) To be so trained is to read the Law (old) in light of its fulfillment in Jesus (new); it is to be trained to see the world from the perspective of God's future that has come and is coming.

³⁵ The Gospel offers both good and bad examples, with Jesus consistently exemplifying the right way to do this and the Scribes and Pharisees the wrong. For a more detailed account of binding and loosing in Matthew's Gospel see Powell (2003:441ff).

³⁶ Matthew 22:37-40, quoting Deuteronomy 6.5 and Leviticus 19.18 respectively. Rather than limit our obligations to God and one another, these commands command a mode of being in relationship to God and neighbor that fulfills the Law in ever deepening communion.

³⁷ Jesus makes a similar statement in the Sermon on the Mount often referred to as "the golden rule," "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and Prophets." (Matt. 7.12)

³⁸ The term translated "hang" is "kermatia." On this conclusion see Barth 1963:77. *Halakah* refers to the rules and decisions handed down by the rabbis to be the authoritative interpretation of the Law.

³⁹ Crossgrove (2002:158) and bibliography cited there. Long ago Augustine wrote, "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and our neighbor does not understand it at all." (*On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W Robertson Jr. New York: Macmillan, 1958:30). On the nature of the love envisioned here see Appendix "B."

⁴⁰ The hermeneutic of radical love roughly corresponds to Jesus' "binding" of the Law in Matthew's Gospel and his hermeneutic of merciful love corresponds roughly to Jesus "loosing" of the Law. The use of the word "radical" here is not to be understood as something akin to a Mountain Dew commercial. Rather it is used in its etymological sense of "going to the root" of something. Frank Matera remarks that the epi-thesis discussed below are, "examples of how Jesus interpreted the law – by *returning to God's original will*. The antitheses are invitations for disciples to do the same: to *seek the deepest meaning of God's law* in order to produce a more abundant righteousness." (*New Testament Ethics*, Louisville: Westminster, 1996:47, emphasis mine)

⁴¹ The term "epi-thesis" is more appropriate than the traditional description of "antithesis" since for Matthew, Jesus is not "anti-Law" but bringing the Law to fulfillment.

⁴² "Matthew demanded a righteousness which 'exceeds that of the scribes' (5.20) The antitheses of 5.21-48 are at once a judgment on the self-serving and petty interpretations of the scribes (see also ch. 23) and a demonstration of the fulfillment of the law in the surpassing righteousness Jesus required. They do not provide 'a new law,' nor do they annul the old one. The law holds, and Jesus fulfills it, bringing it to its own fruition by his perception of the true intention of the Law." (Verhey 1984:87)

⁴³ So, "Do not murder" is applicable to anger and name calling; "Do not commit adultery" to lust, etc. While a few interpreters question whether all six epi-thesis are meant as concrete applications of the law of love, it is certainly true that for Matthew they unfold the meaning of the Law, which culminates in the law of love.

⁴⁴ Note that the six epi-thesis culminate with, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Most modern commentators understand "perfection" here to refer to the concept of wholeness. Holiness/righteousness and human wholeness are correlates in Matthew (Matt. 22.37). Frank Matera's remarks are also instructive for our project, "The fact that they deal with only a small portion of the law suggests that they are examples of how Jesus interpreted the law...the antitheses are invitations for disciples to do the same... Disciples' trained for the kingdom of heaven will interpret the law as Jesus has taught them." (*New Testament Ethics*, Louisville: Westminster, 1996:47)

⁴⁵ Verhey 1984:87. We should also note here that the second half of Jesus' epi-thesis, i.e. "But I say to you...", do not take the form of legal constraints which take a more casuistic form or a straight prohibition, "thou shalt not..."

⁴⁶ D. Hill argues that for Matthew "mercy" is linked to love for God and neighbor. "...eleos (mercy) for Matthew does not exclude the 'Godward meaning' which is primary in the Hebrew *hesed*, a love to God which manifests itself in the attitude of identification with those whom a legalistic religion debarred from their rights as children of Israel." (NTS 24 [1977/8] pp. 116-118)

⁴⁷ Matthew 9.10-13; 12.1-8. Hays notes that, "The repetition of the citation marks it as a matter of special importance for understanding Matthew's ethic. (1996:99) Again, losing the law never meant dismissing scripture but rather the discernment of the Law's intent and of the sphere of its application. In 9.13 Jesus instructs the Pharisees to "Go and learn what this (Hosea 6.6) means." D. Hill argues that the formula does not mean "go and find out what you do not already know," but rather "go and discern the sense of Scripture" or "go make a valid inference from the scriptural statement." (NTS 24 [1977/8] p. 11)

⁴⁸ Matthew 23.23. The full context makes it clear that Jesus is not ignoring the "lighter" parts of the Law, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former." (Matt. 23.23)

⁴⁹ Matthew 23.4; 11.28-30. Significantly, Jesus' invitation echoes the call of Wisdom, often virtually equated with the Law. Hays comments, "Those who take upon themselves Jesus' yoke are in effect taking up the yoke of the Torah as interpreted by Jesus, but his yoke – in light of his hermeneutic of mercy – is not burdensome, in contrast to the systematic interpretations of the Torah being promulgated by Matthew's Pharisaic rivals." (1996:100)

⁵⁰ This is almost a tautology. The practice of the Rule of Christ (fraternal admonition) is to be practice in the context of the rule of Christ (the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven). But it seems quite common to read Matthew 16 and 18 apart from Matthew's wider narrative description of the world. Divorcing the Rule of Christ from the coming of the Kingdom of heaven through Christ exposes the practice to both implausibility and distortion.

⁵¹ On the relationship of polity and mission Barrett writes, "The unity of the church is not an end in itself. The church is called to point beyond itself... The only unity worth striving for is the unity that makes this mission possible. The ultimate test is not what we here on earth can agree on; the ultimate standard against which all church polity is judged is the reign of God... How does this polity invite people to enter the reign of God? How does this polity help the church in its life together to be a sign of the reign of God?" (2000:120)

⁵² "The distance from society that comes from the new birth into a living hope does not isolate [the church] from society... Instead... this distance is a presupposition of mission. Without distance, churches can only give speeches that others have written for them and only go places where others lead them. To make a difference, one must be different." (Miroslav Volf, "Soft Differences: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in I Peter" *Ex Auditu* [Vol. 10, 1994], 18)

⁵³ Of course this has now been filled out by later tradition at Nicaea with the Trinitarian confession of the One God and at Chalcedon with the confession that Jesus is the God-Man; fully human and fully divine.

⁵⁴ Verhey clarifies the relationship of Jesus' commandments to his mission. "The ethic of Matthew is no calculating works-righteousness; it is rather a response to Jesus' announcement of the kingdom and his summons to a surpassing righteousness. The law holds, but not as a basis for making claims on God's mercy. God's mercy is shown, but it may not be presumed upon. Life responsive to Jesus and expectant of his judgment submits to God's reign. That submission, with its surpassing righteousness, stands in contrast to both the hypocritical self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and the lawlessness of some within the Christian community." (Verhey 1984:92)

⁵⁵ "The oneness of Jesus' life and teaching are exactly the opposite of the Scribes' lack of oneness/integrity and therefore failure of authority to lead us to communion with the life of the Father which is self-giving love." (Thanks to my coworker Michael Gulker for this point).

⁵⁶ Canonically, this reflects the creation accounts where humanity is created in the image of God and given the task of ruling as vice-regents on God's behalf to care for and cultivate the world. Through Christ, the second Adam, the church recovers this task. It is also important to note that what is envisioned here is not the authority of the church apart from the authority of Christ. The church and its head are the "whole Christ," working asymmetrically but concurrently as One Body by the Holy Spirit. On the nature of this authority as self-giving love, see ftnt. 54.

⁵⁷ For an excellent overview of this issue in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition see John Roth (2000:7-25). Roth has three thesis: 1) "The principle and practice of church discipline has been foundational to a distinctively Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding of the church;" 2) "For virtually all of our 475-year history, the teachings and practices regarding church discipline have been a source of profound disagreements, intense conflicts, and numerous schisms within the Anabaptist-Mennonite church"; 3) "The future identity and health of the Mennonite church will depend on our willingness to boldly embrace both Thesis 1 and Thesis 2."

⁵⁸ Having such questions and occasions for discernment are not an indication of failure but an opportunity for the church to fulfill her calling. The Rule of Christ is both a gift and a duty which comes to us with the promise of Christ's very own presence.

⁵⁹ Two other points are important here: 1) The two commands should be neither identified nor divorced. (On the one hand, we don't worship our neighbor and, on the other, our love of neighbor is more than mere humanitarianism.) 2) The double love command is not understood by Matthew as a substitute for the other commandments. On the cruciform nature of this love See Appendix "B."

⁶⁰ Thus modern Enlightenment modes of epistemology are overturned. The story-teaching structure of Matthew and the law of love as a requirement for a correct interpretation/embodiment of Scripture take our epistemology in the direction of relationship. Knowing is an aspect of loving, a participation in a relationship. See Appendix "B."

⁶¹ Since Matthew's "radical" and "merciful" examples are rooted in a common hermeneutic of love, they should not be pitted against one another.

⁶² Hauerwas, Stanley. 1981. *Vision and Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 115. See Appendix "B." n.

⁶³ Mathew has no direct statements about homosexuality. He does speak of sexuality and marriage in passages that do bear on the conversation: Matthew 5.27-32; 8.21-22; 10.37; 12.46-50; 19.1-12; 22.23-33.

⁶⁴ Again, to be clear the point here is not that it is okay to violate God's commandments; rather it is to "loose" a commandment as not applying in a particular case.

⁶⁵ So, for example, does a merciful love lead us to loose the Scriptural statements regarding homosexuality from applying to monogamous same sex unions? Or does it lead us to mercifully bind all homosexual acts as sin (because sin destroys us) and bountifully offer the forgiveness of sin.

⁶⁶ So, for example, the coming of the rule of Christ marks the time of eschatological fulfillment which heightens or radicalizes the demand expected in sexual behavior in what we might call both conservative and liberal directions. Consider for example the texts cited above - Matthew 5.27-32; 8.21-22; 10.37; 12.46-50; 19.1-12; 22.23-33.

⁶⁷ So we cannot simply write off the Hebrew Scriptures either as generally irrelevant (e.g. the Genesis accounts) nor ignore its particular statements about homosexuality (e.g. the Holiness Code). We continue to read them, but now in the light of Christ. How to we read the First Testament in light of Christ? McCreight remarks, "Traditional hermeneutics at its best holds a place for Old Testament Law, interpreting it through the lens of the narratives of Jesus. If we are to argue for an interpretation which contradicts that of the tradition, we must make a move analogous to that of the tradition. It will therefore not be adequate to sweep aside an item within the 'Holiness Code' on the basis that Christ has set us free from the burdensome old yoke of the Torah... The context within which the Levitical prohibitions are traditionally read in Christian circles is the law of Christ, which may overthrow some of the Levitical laws but not others, depending on their witness in other parts of the canon. For example, unclean foods are made clean in Christ, but we do not also thereby assume that witchcraft (Lev. 19.26b; etc.) has been made clean, for the New Testament itself witnesses to its impurity. (McCreight 2000:250)

⁶⁸ McCreight 2000:249-250. This is not to suggest that this is an impossibility but only that an adequate account of it will need to be given that is in keeping with Jesus as God's final Word (e.g. Heb. 1.1ff).

⁶⁹ See Matthew 5.17-20; 23.23-24. It would be anachronistic to turn Matthew's comments here into a "theory" of inspiration or hermeneutics. But Matthew's Jesus seems to not only tell us the meaning of the commandments; he is also an exemplar on how we are to learn to interpret/embody Scripture.

⁷⁰ The fuller quote is, "...traditional hermeneutics knew nothing of historical criticism, although similar questions to those asked by the methods of historical criticism were asked by the Fathers, Scholastics, and Reformers. Questions... were asked, but they were always submitted to the overarching conviction that the Scriptures could be trusted to express the divine voice and will... While most revisionist and traditionalists alike will use the Bible and are dedicated to supporting their position via the interpretation of Scripture, the fault line between the two tectonic-hermeneutical plates runs underneath ..." (McCreight 2000:252)

⁷¹ Matthew 5.19.

⁷² Matthew 1.23; 3.17; 11.27; 17.5; etc; but finally 28.18.

⁷³ Hays (1996:202).

⁷⁴ Crosgrove (2002:11).

⁷⁵ Furthermore, as the author of this document, I do not put Crosgrove's formulation of these rules forward as representing my own point of view. But I do find them helpful descriptions of the way we often read Scripture. It is also the case that some of these rules can be found operative in Matthew's Gospel, most obviously the first (in the epi-thesis of Matt. 5), and last (in the exchange about the greatest commandment in Matthew 22.37-40).

⁷⁶ C.f. the question discussed by Grimsrud and Thiessen-Nation, "Why is same-sex intimacy intrinsically sinful?" (2008:219ff). The key texts are Lev. 18.22; 20.13; Rom. 1.26-27; I Cor. 6.9-10 and I Tim. 1.9-10.

⁷⁷ The argument here is whether or not the N.T. writers knew homosexuality as we know it today. Did they only condemn abusive, coercive same-sex relationships or did it include the covenantally committed love of two people of the same sex? A related example of this rule of analogy is, "In what way is the category "homosexual" analogous or non-analogous to other categories of "gender," "race," or "class?" For the arguments that see an analogy between the welcoming of the Gentiles and the welcoming of Gay and Lesbians see Siker, Jeffrey. 1994. *Homosexuality in the Church*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, p. 219-34. And for a response see McCreight (2000:253ff).

⁷⁸ This is a central issue in our pre-meeting reading material by Grimsrud and Thiessen Nations *Reasoning Together* (2008).

⁷⁹ Of course the modern conversation about "sexual orientation" as a matter informed by soft or hard sciences also fits well here. McCreight remarks, "...we cannot resolve the problem by easy appeal to either science or experience, because the data from these arenas are contradictory and inconclusive." (2000 p. 244) In our cultural setting Hays's exhortation on this matter is wise, "Here great caution is necessary to distinguish the appropriate – indeed, inevitable – role of experience in shaping our interpretation of the text from the bolder claim that personal experience can be treated as a source of theological authority independent of Scripture." (1996:211)

⁸⁰ "The rule of faith disallowed any interpretation that contradicted the basic overarching Christian canonical plot with its beginning, climax, and denouement. The rule of love disallowed any interpretation that was nonconductive to love of God and neighbor, and this as defined within that web of belief indicated by the *regula fidei*... The Reformers did not usually use the words 'rules of faith and love,' but more often spoke of this by insisting that Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture." (McCreight 2000:248-9)