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DISCERNMENT AS “NOT KNOWING” AND “KNOWING”: A PERSPECTIVE FROM MATTHEW 25:31-46

ABSTRACT

The article deals with Christian discernment as taking place at the juncture of God's Spirit and the human mind at work. To illustrate this, the concept of “not knowing” in Matthew's Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (25:31-46) is examined, as well as the implicit presence of “knowing”. The article starts by treating the concepts of “all the nations” and “the least” in the parable. It is suggested that the traditional particularist and universalist interpretations need not oppose each other. Subsequently the “not knowing” of the sheep is treated. This is related to the grace of God and being empowered by the Holy Spirit. In addition, it is submitted that “knowing” is also present, in terms of actively seeking the will of God. Thus, Christian discernment takes place at the juncture of “not knowing” (being empowered by God) and “knowing” (purposefully seeking the will of God).

1. INTRODUCTION

I would like to briefly describe the route I wish to follow in discussing the topic of discernment in Matthew 25:31-46.

The essence of discernment is about choices. For example: Which road is best – the broad or the narrow one (Mt 7:13-14)?¹ It is about deciding among competing voices; it is a process of sorting, evaluating and distinguishing (Johnson 1996:25).

1 According to Waaijman (2002:8-9), the unmasking aspect of discernment is at stake in this instance – to use the imagery of a moneychanger: Is the coin genuine or not?

Discernment is also about method: Shall I follow external rules, logic (rationality), experience (wisdom), guidance of the Spirit (charismatic or ecstatic insight), or a combination of these? According to 1 Cor 12:10, discernment (*διακρίσις*) is a gift of the Spirit. But what does this mean epistemologically for discernment, at least as far as Pauline thought is concerned? Munzinger (2007:4) states that, whereas some scholars (e.g. Käsemann and Stuhlmacher) interpret it as a process of human thought, others (e.g. Beker) assume that the Holy Spirit is the subject.²

The position I would like to adopt in this article (following Munzinger 2007:14) is that discernment takes place at the juncture of the human mind and God's Spirit at work. Or, in terms of Matthew 25:31-46, Christian discernment is a mixture of "not knowing" (neither the sheep nor the goats knew that what they did/did not do was for the Son of man) and "knowing". This means that discerning the will of God is a gift of the Spirit, a revelatory moment (i.e., "not knowing" where the insight comes from). However, it is also purposefully seeking the will of God through study and practice (i.e., "knowing" the will of God). The latter aspect is not so obvious from Matthew 25, but will be argued later.

The position of this article – that discernment takes place at the juncture of God's Spirit and the human mind at work – may also be put differently: discernment can be regarded as a conflation of grace and nature. When the charismatic notion in Christian discernment is dominant, God's will is predominantly sought in extraordinary, supernatural, intuitive, even strange behaviour. However, it is also true that God's voice becomes known in what is discernable from natural human conduct and thought. When one observes conduct of moral truth, integrity, practising of righteousness, resistance of selfishness, and embracement of cross-bearing attitudes in the lives of exceptional spiritual people, one also discerns the voice and will of God (Moberly 2006:226). Of course, in order to recognise these Godlike characteristics in others, the one who observes needs the same kind of Spirit; one needs to be "in tune" with the Spirit, so to speak. Paul mentioned that only those who have the mind of the Lord and share in his Spirit can discern spiritual things (1 Cor 2:14-16). Thus, it is when human nature and Spirit unite that true discernment takes place.³

2 Waaijman (2002:10-11) regards 1 Cor 12:10 as part of discerning God's significance: Is a prophetic utterance truly coming from God or from human beings? This means that an utterance purporting to be God's word needs to be interpreted, in order to make sure that it becomes the liberating word of God and not the command of a tyrant.

3 When addressing the issue of discernment, one needs to draw a distinction between discernment as seeking the will of God *per se*, on the one hand, and judging the validity of someone else's claim to speak on God's behalf,

This, in essence, corresponds with Waaijman’s (2002:24-29) notion that ultimately discernment is about testing. The core of one’s being is tested, so that growth toward one’s destination may take place. This also implies eschatological testing, as is obvious from the Parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Only when all is exposed before the judgement seat of the Son of man, will one’s true character be revealed – whether one was able to discern the will of God hidden in the mysterious presence of the Son of man.

2. INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 25:31-36: THE IDENTITY OF “ALL THE NATIONS” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) IN V.32 AND “THE LEAST” (ἐλαχίστοι) IN V.40, 45

In the Parable of the sheep and the goats, both the sheep (those on the right hand of the Son of man) and the goats (those on the left) in the eschatological judgement declare that they “did not know” that they had/had not been serving the Son of man when they encountered the need of “the least”. In order to take advantage of this notion of “not knowing” – as well as the implicit “knowing” – in our parable for the topic of discernment, it is necessary to make out a case for a particular interpretation of the parable. I will not go into all the detail, but since the parable is notoriously fraught with interpretational problems, it is necessary to deal with at least the issues indicated in the heading above.

According to the parable, “all the nations” will be gathered before the glorious throne of the Son of man, and they will be separated into

on the other. Technically, the former, not the latter, is the concern of this article. However, the shared component between the two is that both try to fathom what truly comes from God – the former in terms of everyday life situations, and the latter in terms of people claiming to speak on God’s behalf. Typically, the phenomenon of false and true prophecy would be treated when dealing with the latter situation, as is so masterly done in the book by Moberly (2006). Moberly (2006:18) mentions that the difference between true and false prophecy is that the true prophet always applies the tradition in line with the purpose and intent of the tradition, whereas the false prophet refers to the tradition in a rigid, inappropriate and insensitive manner. Even when a tradition is seemingly violated, as when Jesus reinterpreted the tradition of the fathers, the spiritual person will detect the true prophet. In this regard, Smith (1998:395) mentions that in any religion there are three eras: old rules, no rules, and new rules. Jesus’s emphatic denial of breaking the law, but reinterpreting it as surpassing righteousness, which manifests in love and compassion (cf. Mt 5:20, as explained by the subsequent antitheses), is a good example of this era of new rules.

two groups: sheep and goats. The sheep will gather on the right and the goats on the left of the Son of man (Mt 25:32-33).⁴ Subsequently, these two groups will be judged according to their behaviour toward the Son of man. However, the Son of man identifies himself to such an extent with the “least” that, in effect, it is the conduct toward the latter that forms the ultimate criterion of judgement. Therefore, the question is: Who are “the least” and, together with that, “all the nations”?

This question has, through the ages, led to disparate interpretations among scholars,⁵ and even at present there is no consensus on what these metaphors refer to. I will briefly indicate the two leading interpretations.

2.1 The ecclesiological interpretation

This interpretation is also called the particularist, “dogmatic” (Pokorný 2001:154) or “classic” interpretation (Pokorný 2001:155), and entails that “the least” are viewed as the Christian believers, and “all the nations” as the Gentiles. The least may be “fine-tuned” as the disciples in Jesus’s time, or the Matthean community (Brown 1990:172) toward the end of the first century AD, or the wandering missionaries sent out by the Matthean community (Pokorný 2001:154).

The central argument on which this view is built is that “the least” is a typical Matthean ecclesiological term. Matthew 10 deals with the sending out of the disciples to the lost sheep of Israel to announce the imminent coming of the kingdom of heaven, and to call them to repentance. In Matthew 10:40-42, the disciples are called “prophets”, “the righteous”, and “little ones”, the latter being the same term used in Matthew 18:6, 10, 14 to describe the “little ones” believing in Jesus. Thus “the least” (ἐλαχίστοι), the superlative form of “little ones” (μικροί), must also be a description of people believing in Jesus.

The situation in Matthew 10:40-42 ties in well with the scene described in Matthew 25. While in Chapter 10 the house of Israel is being judged according to their behaviour (e.g. offering a cup of water) to the disciples (= little ones), in Chapter 25, it is the nations being judged for their conduct

4 I will not go into a lengthy discussion about either the positions of left and right or sheep and goats. Suffice it to say that, according to the parable, “left” and “goats” represent disapproval, whereas “right” and “sheep” represent approval (cf. Court 1985, who gives an extensive overview of how left and right have become biblical and general metaphors of bad and good ethical judgment and behaviour, respectively).

5 Gray (1989) has given an extensive overview of the interpretation of “the least of my brothers” from the patristic period to the modern time.

toward “the least”. Therefore, according to the ecclesiological interpretation, “all the nations” refers to the unbelieving nations of the world and how they are being judged for their behaviour *vis-à-vis* the Christian believers. This interpretation has all kinds of variations: the world’s behaviour toward the messengers of Christ, in general,⁶ or Matthean community, in particular, or wandering missionaries of the Matthean church, or how the world reacted to the proclamation of the gospel. Be it as it may, according to this interpretation, the world is being judged on whether they recognised the Son of man within his followers and humble emissaries.

This view also ties in with one strand of the Matthean Gospel, namely its particularist point of view. Jesus’s ministry is geared, to a large extent, toward Israel alone. Very seldom does he venture out beyond the boundaries of Israel. The Matthean Jesus is more concerned with the lost sheep of Israel than ministering to the Gentiles and Samaritans, as for example in Luke.⁷ This translates into the notion that a minority group is being encouraged by God. In turn, this points to the function of the parable in Matthew 25:31-46, namely to encourage⁸ the Matthean community by

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- 6 Although Keener (1999:605) accepts the identification of “the least” with Jesus’s representatives (i.e. the disciples), according to him, the emphasis is not so much on serving the poor, but on receiving the gospel’s messengers. The nations will be judged on the basis of their acceptance or rejection of the messengers of the gospel. A slightly different interpretation is proposed by Michaels (1965:30-31). According to him, “the least” are the teachers, and “the nations” are those who are being taught. He bases this understanding on Matthew 10:42, where the disciples (equated to the teachers in the Matthean community) are called “little ones”, and the nations are all of those who have been taught, i.e. evangelised, whether in the Matthean community or as Gentiles.
- 7 This strand in Matthew leads Mattill (1974) to the conclusion that the universal scope of the parable (“all the nations” gathered before the Son of man) is not from Jesus. Originally, the parable had a different location in the Jesus tradition – following directly on Matthew 10 – and the wording consisted of “the house of Israel” being gathered before the throne. Matthew relocated it to the current place, and changed “house of Israel” to “all the nations”, in view of the Gentile mission that had already taken place. However, it is interesting to note that Mattill’s view remains highly speculative.
- 8 According to Suh (2006:232-233), the point of the parable is not so much encouragement, but admonishment. At the time when Matthew was writing, the Gentile mission was in jeopardy. He then uses the parable to admonish two groups in the Matthean community – the sheep and the goats – to support the Christian mission (the work of the least), the latter being wandering missionaries sent out by the congregation. The sheep are those who support the mission, albeit not yet sufficiently. The goats are those who render no support. Either

the prospect of the Son of man judging the world on the basis of how they treated the believers (cf. Keener 1999:606).

The ecclesiological interpretation is marred by two shortcomings: that Christians are excluded from the final judgement, and the fact that both the sheep and the goats did not know that they were dealing with Christ's messengers. The next leading interpretation addresses these shortcomings.

2.2 The universalist interpretation

During the 20th century, the universalist interpretation became the dominant exegesis of Matthew 25:31-46 (cf. Gray 1989:347). According to this understanding, "all the nations" refers to all humanity. All people, Christians included, will appear before the throne of the Son of man and be judged on the basis of their conduct toward "the least".

Following this view, the question is: Who are "the least"? The brief answer is: All the needy and suffering people of the world who, on account of their situation, appeal to the mercy and compassion of their fellow human beings. The motivation for this interpretation follows below.

The universalist interpretation rests on the following premises.

2.2.1 Internal logic flowing from Matthew's narrative

Matthew 24:14 mentions that the end will not come before all the nations have been evangelised. Matthew 25:31-46 depicts the final judgement of all people (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη). It is about the universal power of the Son of man, and the context points to the *parousia* (France 2007:959). Thus, one may assume that the nations have already been evangelised (Via 1987:91).⁹ Chronologically, this text is therefore later than Matthew 28:18-20, where the disciples are commissioned to evangelise the entire world (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη), although in the narrative of Matthew it comes before Matthew 28. The command of Matthew 28 has been fulfilled. The point is: it cannot only be the unbelieving nations that are gathered in this instance; it must be all people, including those who have heard the gospel. No one can plead ignorance about the will of God for human conduct.

way, both are admonished to fully support the mission, because only in this way will Jesus be present among them.

9 According to Brown (1990:175), the fact that "nations" is mentioned in 25:32 proleptically "recalls" the discipling of the nations in Matthew 28:19. Otherwise, the scene in Matthew 25 will be a judgement of individuals.

2.2.2 Comparison with Matthew 10

Apart from the agreements with Matthew 10:40-42, there is an important difference. In Matthew 10, help is given, because the little one is a *disciple*. In Matthew 25, this aspect is absent; help is given simply because the other is in need. “The least” are not openly presented as disciples of Christ. At best, Christ is “incognito” present in them.

2.2.3 Argument from structure and genre

First, I will discuss structure. Scholars have drawn attention to the fact that Matthew 25:31-46 forms the climax of the last grand discourse in Matthew (Mt 23-25). In Matthew 23, Jesus announces the end of Judaism (cf. v.38), and in Matthew 24, the end of the world. In the latter, the dominant theme is alertness, since the hearers do not know when the end comes. In Matthew 25, Jesus initially by means of two parables (Ten virgins and The talents) elaborates upon the notion of being alert and prepared. Finally, in Matthew 25:31-46, he shows *how* they should stay watchful, namely by performing deeds of righteousness toward the needy. The scene in the last parable is grandiose and final: the whole world gathers before the glorious throne of the Son of man in order to be judged. And the outcome of the judgement is decisive: eternal life or eternal punishment. It is hard to imagine that the only function this parable has is to comfort the believers that they will be vindicated in the end. No, as in the rest of Matthew, this passage rather appeals to all – believers included – that the final judgement is about exposing everybody’s inner being and associated outer actions.

The structural argument is strengthened by that of genre. Scholars (e.g. France 2007:957-961; Via 1987:80) have shown conclusively that the main argument is steered not so much by the parable elements of sheep and goats, but by eschatological imagery, derived from Daniel 7:13-14. For example, it is only in Matthew 25:32-33 that the sheep and goats are mentioned; in the rest of the “parable”, the conversation is between people and the Son of man. The genre of this passage is rather that of an eschatological discourse.

The cumulative force of the above arguments is that the universalist interpretation presents itself as the more acceptable one. Most of the leading motifs of the Gospel of Matthew are present in this interpretation: the works of righteousness that are expected of the disciples, but that are also the expression of God’s will for all people; the disciples who are equally subject to the judgement of God like everybody else,¹⁰ and the

10 Cf. the Parable of the weeds in Matthew 13, suggesting that the Matthean community is a *corpus mixtum*. According to Shaw (2007:319), Matthew is not

discipling of all nations that will inaugurate the end. With this in mind, it is more plausible to accept a universal interpretation where “all the nations” is regarded as all of humankind, including Christian believers, and “the least” is taken as all those in need of our compassion.

However, I am of the opinion that there is a closer connection between the two leading interpretations than merely making a choice between them. If one takes into consideration that, in Matthew, church and kingdom of heaven are closely related, then the church should demonstrate kingdom norms. Matthew 18, for example, teaches what real greatness in the kingdom of heaven is. It is to become like a child (v.3), not to stand in the way of the faith of the little ones (church members) (vv.6-9), and to reach out to others in persevering love and forgiveness (vv.10-35). Being in service of the kingdom, the church is also at stake in Matthew 21:43, which states that the kingdom of God will be taken away from the Jews and given to a people (*ἔθνος*) that will produce its fruit. The implication is that this “people” is God’s new people, the disciple or Matthean community, the church.

This relationship between church and kingdom has consequences for the interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46. It means that the parable has an ecclesiological application with universal implications (cf. Van Zyl 1988:20). The church should practise what will be universal criteria for attaining eternal life in the eschatological judgement. By slightly adapting the traditional ecclesiological interpretation, one can say that “the least” are those in the church who are religiously and socially easily offended and wounded. Their vulnerable position should make an appeal to those in leadership positions in the believing community. Thus, the sheep are those who are sensitive and tend to the needs of the least, and the goats are those who are insensitive and have not clothed themselves with the overflowing righteousness mentioned in Matthew 5:20. The church thus becomes a lived and living example to the world which, in turn, leads to a full-fledged universal interpretation: what is expected of church members

precise about who are “inside” and who are “outside”, because the kingdom’s presence in the world is hidden. Only the last judgement will finally separate the righteous and the lawless who have hitherto been living together indiscernible from each other (France 2007:962). The judgement cuts both ways – the weeds are destroyed and the good seeds are gathered. However, this also means that those who posed as good seed will be exposed as weeds (cf. Mt 7:21-23: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven.”). Concerning the latter passage, Talbert (2004:139) draws our attention to the fact that it is part of three units in Matthew 7:13-27 (two gates, two trees, and two houses), all of which are related to the expectation of the end and the prospect of judgement.

in their mutual relationships is precisely what the Son of man will demand of all of humankind on the day of judgement.¹¹

One can thus say that mercy and compassion form the bridge between the ecclesiological and universal interpretation. It is precisely these characteristics that the Matthean church needs to live out in full view of the world. Ultimately, all people will be judged by the norms of mercy and compassion. Thus, these norms are missionary in nature, since they represent God’s will for all people as they nurture humanitarian standards. Indeed, the Son of man will enquire into the deeds of righteousness of all who appear before him. These deeds reveal an inner disposition and attitude, as we shall notice later in the article. Ultimately, the footprints of ecclesial faith are everywhere, even where faith is not openly confessed (Pokorný 2001:156).

In this fashion, the dichotomy between the ecclesiological and universal interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46 is transcended. It better represents the inner theological and ecclesiological dynamics of the Matthean Gospel than merely opting for *one* of the two powerful interpretations that, until the present, have had their staunch supporters among exegetes.

The above interpretation inevitably leads to the conclusion that there is not a big difference between “all the nations” and the Christian believers gathered before the throne of the Son of man. As noted earlier, at this point the nations had already been evangelised. All people live in the presence of the Son of man. His footprints are all over the world. Even if you have not met him in person, the anonymous Christ encounters you in his brothers – “the least”, the needy and the oppressed of the world. “The least” are, therefore, not only objects of our compassion, but also subjects embodying the Son of man in whose presence we live (Watson 1993:76). This is the way he is God-with-us (Jacob 2002:105-106). A response to “the least” is a response to Jesus.

By adopting this view, one can also better address the matter of discernment in Matthew 25:31-46. What is at stake, in this instance, manifests itself in all circles of life, whether in the inner sphere of church life or in the larger domain of human existence. It is all about those attitudes and actions that human beings must have known and discerned all along (Via 1987:85). It is to this aspect that we now turn.

11 This interpretation corresponds to Heil’s view (1998:13) that the parable encourages the audience to identify with both the sheep (those who practise righteousness toward the needy) and the little ones (those who adopt the humility required of disciples [e.g. Mt 18:1-5] in order to bring the kingdom to the world).

3. “NOT KNOWING” AND HIDDEN ATTITUDES IN MATTHEW 25:31-46

The element of “not knowing” is plainly present in Matthew 25:31-46. In the eschatological judgement, the king addresses the righteous (δίκαιοι) and the accursed (κατηραμένοι) and tells them that they respectively served him/did not serve him when he was in need of food, drink, housing, clothing and visitation. Then, in vv.37-39 and 44, both the righteous and the accursed ask Him: “Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, etc?” Neither group knows that what they did or did not do to the least was with a view to the Son of man. (The element of “knowing” is also present, albeit implicitly. I will turn to this element later in this article, Section 5.)

The question at stake in the “not knowing” of the two groups is on what grounds are they justified or condemned. On the surface, it seems that works or deeds of righteousness are the criterion. Helping the least results in hearing the king/Son of man say: “Blessed are you ... inherit the kingdom” (v.34). Not helping the least leads to “depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire” (v.41). However, these actions reflect deeper issues.

Scholars have debated the issue whether faith or lack of faith in Jesus – or its flip side, grace of God – plays any role in the eternal destiny of the sheep and goats. There are those (e.g. France 2007:959) who mention that faith plays no role in their destiny. The righteous are justified by works. At most, they are what theologians presently call “anonymous Christians”. Matthew is not a systematic theologian. We should not try to work out a kind of Pauline work ethic where faith in Jesus forms the basis of our actions. Rather, we should accept the ultimate outworking of the Matthean motif of reward for those who lived according to the will of God (5:12). The emphasis is on the *deeds* of righteousness.

However, even though the emphasis is on deeds, within the Matthean theology works of righteousness should always be viewed within the context of grace and faith. When Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount calls his disciples to an ethic of surpassing righteousness (5:20), it follows the beatitudes where they are called blessed, because they are poor in spirit, that is, expecting all from God.¹² In the Parable of the workers in the vineyard, it is the generosity (ἀγαθός) of the landowner (κύριος) that stands out (Mt 20:15), not the strict economic law of wages being paid according to the hours of labour. To the contrary, the workers who worked only one

12 “Blessed” and “poor of spirit” relate to each other as “grace” and “faith”, respectively, forming the divine and human side of the relationship between God and human beings.

hour receive exactly the same wages as those who toiled away the entire day in the hot sun. It is the inexplicable grace of the Lord that receives all attention in the parable. He wants to give his grace equally to all (20:12, 14), irrespective of the merit of the receiver.

Therefore, Matthew 25:31-46 is not only about works; it is also about the underlying sentiments and attitudes of the two groups that explain their behaviour, even though these are not explicitly mentioned. Consequently, the judgement according to their (lack of) *deeds* is not the full picture; rather it is their basic attitudes rising to the surface that make the difference (cf. Grindheim 2008:331). The mindsets of the two groups explain their deeds. This means that, although the question asked by the two groups is exactly the same, it is only superficially so. The question of the blessed or righteous is one of pleasant surprise: “Is it really so that we have done all of this for the Son of man? We never realised this.” But the question of the accursed speaks of arrogance, resentment, and self-righteousness; it calls into question the validity of the Lord’s accusation: “Excuse me, but we never saw you in any predicament; you are being grossly unfair to us.”¹³

Yes, there is ignorance with both groups, but it is not the same kind of ignorance. Both groups do not realise that religious life (relationship to God) and ethics (relationship to one’s neighbour) belong together; they are inextricably bound together. Wholeness of life follows when these two spheres are being kept together (Munzinger 2007:14). What gives admission to the kingdom of God is a unity of heart and action (Via 1987:96); it is about grace at work. With the righteous, their ignorance works as follows: they did not think of themselves as particularly religiously inclined. They thought they had only partially done what was necessary in the relationship with God – deeds of compassion (ethics) – but, in fact, they did all that was required. On the contrary, the accursed thought they had performed all that was required – religious rituals, even confessing the name of Jesus – but, in fact, they had only partially done what was necessary. In so doing, they revealed their true nature as hypocrites and false prophets. They say “Lord, Lord”, but are not interested in doing the will of God (Mt 7:15-23;¹⁴ 23:23) (Via 1987:97-98).

13 Grindheim (2008:319-326) extensively shows how the ignorance of the righteous, the concomitant belonging together of grace and works, and the difference between the blessed and the accursed are themes being worked out in several places by Matthew – e.g. in the Sermon on the Mount, in the disciples’ following of Jesus, and in the purity of heart in contrast to mere external righteousness.

14 These verses provide the basis for recognition of false prophets – their fruits, that is, good deeds. Talbert (2004:140) states: “The Matthean Jesus’ crucial test is the bearing of good fruit”, which in Matthew consists of works of mercy

It has become clear from the above argument that a world of attitude is involved in the stance of “not knowing”. The question is: What implications does this have for the topic of Christian discernment. I now turn to this.

4. “NOT KNOWING” AND DISCERNMENT IN MATTHEW 25:31-46

The main thrust of the argument in the previous section was that underlying the righteous *actions* is a world of righteous *attitude*, pointing to some kind of relationship with the Son of man. Unknowingly, the righteous are in touch with the grace of God that results in deeds of righteousness.

This is of crucial importance for the issue of discernment. In order to discern the will of God in everyday life, in order to respond to matters in a way that is important to God, one has to be in touch with the will of God. This can only happen when one is in tune with the mind of God, when one is filled with his Spirit. Otherwise, there can be no spontaneous, “unknowing” righteous response.

Evidently, this leads to the issue of the empowerment of the disciples by the Spirit of God. Matthew is not the first Gospel one will turn to in order to investigate the work of the Spirit (cf. La Verdiere 1987:274; Charette 1996:31). It is usually the Lucan double work and John’s Gospel that spring to mind in this regard, not Matthew. But this does not mean that the Spirit is absent from Matthew. Charette (1996) has shown convincingly how Matthew in key areas introduces the Spirit. In the *life of Jesus* this is apparent in several events. His *birth* is viewed not only as from the lineage of David (1:1), but also as coming from the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20). Therefore, the Messiah is not in the ordinary sense of the word the son of David, but actually his Lord (22:41-45). At his *baptism*, the Spirit of God descends upon him like a dove (3:16). Henceforth, he will act in the power of the Spirit, as indicated by the *temptation* event in the desert. This is a purposefully Spirit-led episode (4:1) to demonstrate that the alluring power of the devil is being overcome by Jesus’s close relationship with God, so differently from the other son of God, Israel, who more than often failed to heed the voice of God in their desert journey. The power of Jesus’s ministry is further illustrated by his overthrowing of the domain of Satan when he *casts out*

and compassion, especially to those in need. Via (1990:77) is of the opinion that the false prophets were Jewish Christians who practised a kind of external obedience, “putting more store in having the Spirit than in belonging to the historical order with its moral responsibilities”.

demons by the Spirit (12:28). When the Pharisees want to discredit¹⁵ this ministry as instigated by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, Jesus brands it as blasphemy, a sin that will not be forgiven. Because the ministry of Jesus is performed in the power of the Spirit, it is such a heinous offence to regard it as originating from Satan that it is regarded as “speaking against the Spirit”, an unforgiveable sin (12:31-32).

What is true of Jesus is also true of his followers, the *disciples*. They too are shown to be filled with the Spirit. This is demonstrated in several ways.¹⁶ When John the Baptist contrasts the baptising ministry of the stronger one coming after him with that of his own, he depicts it as a baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire (3:11). As noted earlier, at his baptism Jesus received the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was his to entrust to others. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in Matthew that the disciples were baptised by Jesus, in fact the whole ministry of the disciples in terms of their calling, wrestling with Jesus’s identity and their own task, as well as their missions to Israel (Mt 10) and the nations (Mt 28:18-20) is none other than the working out of their baptism with the Holy Spirit. For example, in Matthew 10:1, they are given authority over unclean spirits to cast them out, the same kind of action Jesus did by the power of the Spirit (12:28). In 10:19-20, the disciples are encouraged by the fact that, whenever they are on trial, they need not be concerned about what to say, because it will be given to them; it will be the Spirit of the Father¹⁷ speaking through them. In terms of our topic, they will be able to discern through the Holy Spirit what the appropriate words are in those circumstances. In 13:11, Jesus tells them that they have been given the capacity to understand – to discern (γινώσκειν) – the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. It is no wonder that, by means of their spokesman Peter, they are able to recognise the true identity of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (16:16). However, this “being able to recognise” is because of the mystery having been *revealed* to Peter (16:17). Revelation and recognition are flipsides of the same coin. God’s wisdom is being revealed to babes, but in order to receive this wisdom,

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- 15 Shaw (2007:12) points out that it was a common strategy in antiquity “to denigrate one’s opponent to attribute their claim to power to demons or the devil, and to accuse an individual of being a magician, a sorcerer, a deceiver, or a false prophet” This is clearly what lies behind Matthew 12:24. The accusation that Jesus was using demonic powers to cast out demons is not only found in the Synoptic tradition, but also in John 8:48, where Jesus is accused of being a Samaritan and possessed by a demon.
- 16 For the following events relating to the disciples, see Kirchschräger 1987:35-37; La Verdere 1987:277; Charette 2000:126-127.
- 17 Warrington (2005:15) points out that Matthew refers twenty times to God as Father, in contrast to one such description in Mark and three in Luke. In this way, Matthew creates a special bond between the disciples and God as Father.

one needs to have the insight to come to Jesus and find rest (Mt 11:25-30) (cf. Shaw 2007:241).

In light of the empowerment of the disciples, it is remarkable how little they were able to accomplish during the earthly ministry of Jesus (cf. Charette 2000:130). They failed so many times. For example, they were unable to cast out the demon from a boy (17:16) or to recognise the little children as being part of God's kingdom (19:13-15); they quarrelled among themselves (20:24); they had illusions of grandeur (18:1; 20:21), and they failed to stay vigilant during Jesus's suffering in Gethsemane (26:36-46), not to mention Peter's denial of Jesus (26:69-75). All this does not lessen the fact that they were allowed into a special relationship with Jesus and through him with the Father, and that they were given the basic faculties to understand the mysteries of the kingdom. Perhaps Charette (2000:130) is correct in saying that what little authority or insight – discernment – they had, was proleptically given to them until they were fully empowered by the Spirit after the death, resurrection and last missionary duty of Jesus (28:18-20). In this last scene, Jesus transfers his authority to the disciples when he commands them to make disciples of the nations by baptising and teaching them. Indeed, this baptism is in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Only now can they fully appreciate the baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire that was promised in Matthew 3:11.

The last scene in Matthew (28:16-20) in many ways draws together the main strands of Matthew's Gospel – Jesus's authority over all powers, the transference of his authority to the disciples, the mission to the nations, the authoritative teaching of Jesus, and the abiding presence of Jesus in the church.¹⁸ It is this last aspect that brought Charette (2000:103, 110-125) to comment on the fact that the Matthean community now replaces the temple as the place of God's presence with his people. The temple in the Old Testament functioned as the point of contact between heaven and earth. But now this function is being taken over by the disciple community. Charette points out how the motifs of the disciples going up to the mountain in Galilee, them worshipping Jesus, the name of God going out to all nations, and God's presence with the believers, are all temple motifs and call into remembrance the promise of the rebuilding of the temple in 2 Chron 36. The latter text comprises the motifs of all the kingdoms of the earth being gathered, and the Lord God being with them. If this alignment of Matthew 28:16-20 to 2 Chron 36 is correct, it strengthens the argument that the disciples are now bearers and custodians of the will of God in the world. They are enabled by the presence of the Lord in their midst

18 Luz (1995:139) mentions that all of Matthew 28:16-20 is redactional, purposefully designed by Matthew to draw together the main strands of his Gospel.

to fathom his mind,¹⁹ to discern where and how the Son of man is to be recognised on earth. They are now of the same mind as God.

Thus enabled, one is in a position to intuitively recognise – discern – the presence of the Son of man in the least of his brothers, even though one does so unknowingly. “Not knowing” that one is serving the Son of man highlights the underlying disposition of surrendering to Christ and having faith in God, as well as experiencing the empowering presence of God’s grace and Spirit at work. Only then one is operating on the same wavelength as God and one is in tune with his mind. By reaching out to the needy of the world, one demonstrates one’s life as *coram Deo*, that one has a relationship with the Son of man, that one is actually doing it for him, even though one is not contemplating it as such.

In a remarkable sermon on Mt 25:31-46, Bultmann (1962:48-50) echoed similar thoughts in 1959.²⁰ The accursed on the left are not so much condemned for their (lack of) actions, but for whom they are. Their inner person is being exposed by their lack of discerning the Son of man in the least. And the blessed on the right, their inner being too is being revealed by their deeds of mercy, compassion and righteousness. This “not knowing” makes us realise that there is a deeper dimension to life that is not always visible to people, not even to those involved, but that it nevertheless forms an indispensable part of Christian discernment.

5. “KNOWING” AND DISCERNMENT IN MATTHEW 25:31-46

I indicated earlier that there is an element of “knowing” involved in Matthew 25:31-46, albeit implicitly. I now turn to this aspect.

Several scholars have drawn our attention to the fact that there might be a reason why Matthew refrains from overemphasising the work of the Holy Spirit. Luz (2006:57) and Shaw (2007:239-240) proffer the notion that Matthew most probably had to contend with the phenomenon of spiritual enthusiasm in the Matthean community. People’s claims about the working of the Spirit are often ambiguous. Matthew 7:15-20 speaks of false prophets confessing the name of Jesus, even prophesying in his name, casting out demons and doing many powerful deeds, but then

19 In this regard, Johnson (1996:67) points out that the so-called disciplinary action displayed in Matthew 18:15-20 is not so much a legal procedure, but rather a means to discern the will of the Lord in their presence, to get in line with the mind of the Holy Spirit.

20 Held in the Hendricks Chapel, Syracuse, New York on 26/4/1959.

being unmasked as unknown to Jesus and as lawbreakers (ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν). Matthew 24:4-5, 11, 23-26 also speaks of the misleading nature of the false prophets concerning expectations about the end of the age. This is the reason why Jesus introduces the elements of uncertainty about the time of the *parousia*, the signs of his coming, and the concomitant notion of vigilance. Throughout the discourse in Matthew 24-25, Jesus is stressing the importance of being ready and vigilant at all times. The only way to be vigilant is to be mindful of – to discern – the will of God.

The fact that the last judgement scene is stressing the importance of works of mercy and compassion to the least on the Day of Judgement makes it imperative for believers to be able to consciously discern the will of God. That is the reason why Matthew is focusing on the authority of Jesus (7:28-29), his teaching of and calling to deeds of righteousness (5:20), and why in the great commission (28:19-20) it is not so much the Holy Spirit that is foregrounded but rather the abiding presence of Jesus in their midst. Of course, the Spirit is the life-giver, and through the Holy Spirit Jesus becomes more than just a mere religious figure of the past. However, it is equally true that the Holy Spirit is the presence of *Jesus of Nazareth*. Jesus is the guide and criterion of the Spirit, and so the Holy Spirit becomes something other than our own spirit's self-aggrandisement or wishful and illusionary thinking (Luz 2006:62). Ultimately, the nations must be taught everything that Jesus has commanded them. This is the only way in which to counteract the ambiguity inherent in the speech and actions of people claiming the illumination by the Spirit and speaking on God's behalf.

This is the element of "knowing" in Christian discernment, which is also present in Matthew 25:31-46, albeit implicitly. The context of the Matthean Gospel necessitates this interpretation. The term "righteous" (δικαιος), which describes those on the Son of man's right (25:37,46), as well as the emphasis on deeds of mercy recall the righteous deeds highlighted so often in the Sermon on the Mount as a necessary requirement to enter the kingdom of heaven (e.g. 5:20). The disciple cannot only rely on the "not knowing", the intuitive relationship with the Son of man. Once one has tasted his knowledge and come to know him, one cannot fake ignorance of his will. To the contrary, one also has the longing and responsibility to be moulded and educated by his will. One's mind needs to be shaped and sharpened in order to discern the will of God – "what is good and well-pleasing and perfect" (Rom 12:2). If this is not done purposefully and consciously, one is not being truthful and obedient.

How important it is to consciously discern the will of God becomes clear in a passage such as Matthew 16:19, where Peter is entrusted with

the keys of the kingdom in order to “bind” (δέω) and “unbind” (λύω). This formula is usually perceived as the church’s authority to forgive sins or withhold forgiveness of sins, an interpretation supported by Matthew 18:18, where the context of forgiveness is apparent. However, Powell (2003:438, 441-442) made out a strong case for a different understanding of the formula in Matthew 16. He has extensively shown how “bind” and “unbind” rather relates to the capacity of respectively discerning when and what of the Law of Moses should be applied, and when and what not. It is about using one’s discretion to know in which circumstances a particular aspect of the law is applicable or not. In a sense, the whole ministry of Jesus is about a re-application of the law, in order to discern its true meaning and application. For example, in 5:21-23, Jesus *binds* the law about murder to include even anger with one’s brother; he extends it further than most would allow for. In this instance, Jesus is stricter than the valid interpretation of his time. But in 12:9-14, he *unbinds* the law about the Sabbath to accommodate works of mercy on the Sabbath. In this instance, Jesus is more lenient than the going understanding. The point is: all this requires keen spiritual discernment. One does not only need to know the extent and range of the will of God but also its heart.

6. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN “NOT KNOWING” AND “KNOWING”

It should have become clear by now that Christian discernment, as revealed in Matthew 25:31-46, is a matter of both “not knowing” and “knowing”. The only question remaining is: Exactly how are they related?

The obvious answer is that it is neither “not knowing” nor “knowing”, but both. The one cannot go without the other; there is an interaction between them. Without “knowing” (the conscious seeking of God’s will), the danger is always that “not knowing” (the relational, the intuitive sharing in God’s mercy) may become without content and direction, like a ship without a rudder on the open sea. Without “not knowing”, the “knowing” is most certainly bound to become hollow and shallow, like the sound of a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (cf. 1 Cor 13:1). This was more or less the situation in the Judaism of Jesus’s time. Although we should not make a caricature of first-century Judaism, as Sanders (1977) warned us,²¹ the

21 According to Sanders, we should consider first-century Palestinian Judaism in terms of covenantal nomism, and not sheer legalism, as we were led to believe by the polemical statements in the New Testament and a biased Reformation theology of grace and law. Covenantal nomism points to Torah obedience that was not experienced as a means to win God’s grace, but as a way to express

fact is that, from Jesus's perspective (as seen through Matthew's eyes), Jewish life was riddled with religious practices – external works of the law without real essence. Religious leaders excelled in these, but neglected the most important in the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness (Mt 23:23). They put heavy loads on peoples' shoulders without moving a finger to help them (23:4).

Christian discernment, therefore, is a combination of “not knowing” and “knowing” – living from the grace and empowerment of God, on the one hand, and consciously seeking his will, on the other. This is a special characteristic of Christian discernment. The disciple is placed between unknowing innocence and knowing insight, both being constitutive of the believer (Via 1987:97). Thus seen, salvation and damnation, as indicated by Matthew in 25:31-46, are not destinations added to eschatology, but have already flowed from two different stances starting in this life (Via 1987:100).

“Not knowing” and “knowing” are not only present in Matthew 25:31-46, but may also be illustrated when Matthew 6:22-23 and 13:10-17 brought them into play with each other (Via 1997:125-146). The former passage is about the sound eye. According to ancient thinking, the eye is not so much an organ receiving light, but rather one radiating light; it reflects the inner workings of the soul (cf. also Betz 1985:71-87; Luz 1985:360²²). Thus, when the eye is sound (*ἀπλοῦς*), one's whole body is full of light, but when the eye is bad (*πονηρός*), one's whole body is full of darkness. The eye represents the inner life or stance before God. It reflects what God has done by overpowering one with his Spirit, revelation or the mystery of his kingdom. But this needs to be brought into play with Matthew 13:10-17. Although v.11 speaks of the revelation of God (“It has been given to you to understand the mysteries of the kingdom ...”), the rest of the passage emphasises the disciples' ability to see and to understand. Thus God's revelation and human capacity are working together to establish understanding. Therefore, although v.16 speaks of being blessed (God's revelation), the remainder of the verse is about being able to see and hear (human actions). No one is certain how exactly this works, but neither can it be denied that both are constitutive for discernment.²³

one's gratitude to God for his gracious gifts of Torah and deliverance in the history of Israel (cf. deSilva 2004:615).

- 22 Although Luz acknowledges this background, he propounds a thorough ethical understanding of Matthew 6:22-23, i.e., that the “light in you” refers to one's actions: “Wenn es mit deinem Handeln, deinem Gehorsam, besonders deiner Freigebigkeit nicht stimmt, ist die Finsternis total” (1985:361).
- 23 In this regard, Adams (1997:349) remarks that “discernment of God's call to live into God's holy realm requires a leap of faith even as it calls forth leaps into discipline”. This “leap of faith” and “leaps into discipline” coincide with

In addition, the two aspects of discernment do not operate in cold blood, as callous calculated actions. The secret of discernment is that the left hand should not know what the right hand is doing (Mt 6:3). When one is consciously contemplating the will of God, discerning which action is best (the “knowing” dimension), it is not done with ulterior motives, such as trying to impress people (Mt 6:5; 23:5-7) or to establish a relationship with God (6:7). The latter is already in place; one’s conscious actions in doing the will of God flow from this relationship. When one is in relationship with God (the “not knowing” element), one is not so much consciously seeking ways and means to fulfil the will of God; one simply does what one’s hand finds to do as a natural expression of this relationship. Deeds of compassion simply flow naturally from this relationship (the “not knowing” dimension). This is what happened to the sheep in our parable.

Of course, the nature and practice of discernment is much more complicated and multifaceted than what can be gleaned from the above account of Matthew 25:31-46. For instance, I have not touched on the communal aspect of discernment, which is so important for Christian understanding, and upon which many scholars have extensively elaborated (e.g. Johnson 1996:58). However, this is not the theme of this article. It can be mentioned that all the essential elements of Christian discernment are contained in the aspects of “not knowing” and “knowing” in Matthew 25:31-46. Or, as Munzinger (2007:14) puts it (see also the beginning of this article), discernment takes place at the juncture of the human mind and God’s Spirit at work.

my categories of “not knowing” and “knowing”, that is, acknowledging the revelatory moment as well as human responsibility to enter into a lifelong relationship with God that entails a disciplined study of his word.

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