

THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUIVALENCY:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE HERMENEUTICS OF SHAILER  
MATHEWS<sup>1</sup>

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Shailer Mathews (1863-1941) was the leading member of what is known as the Chicago School of Theology.<sup>2</sup> He was reared in a strict Puritan environment but when he went to college (1880-1884) he was influenced by Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer. Although some of his contemporaries were abandoning their evangelical affiliations, Mathews remained within the evangelical group; but "it led to an attitude of mind which was sensitive to theological adjustment."<sup>3</sup>

He came to Chicago in 1894 and after serving as Associate Professor of NT History (1894-1897), Professor of NT History (1897-1905), Professor of Systematic Theology (1905-1906), and Professor of Historical and Comparative Theology (1906-1926), he became Dean of the Divinity School.

*The Problem*

The problem that led Mathews to his theory of interpre-

<sup>1</sup> No definitive study has yet been published on Shailer Mathews. C. H. Arnold, *Near the Edge of Battle: A Short History of the Divinity School and the "Chicago School of Theology" 1866-1966* (Chicago, 1966), p. 125, reported that a doctoral dissertation was being written on Mathews as theologian. For two short studies, see Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York, 1962), pp. 147-168, and John S. Reist, Jr., "The Dread of the Father: An Analysis of the Theological Method of Shailer Mathews," *Foundations*, VIII (1965), 239-255. A paper by Luther Martin, "Shailer Mathews and the Current State of Biblical Studies," is reported to have been read at the 1968 meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature (*JBL*, LXXXVIII [1969], 126).

<sup>2</sup> On the Chicago School, see the bibliography listed by Arnold, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-131.

<sup>3</sup> Shailer Mathews, *New Faith for Old* (New York, 1936), p. 18.

tation is a common basic one. It is the very basis of interpretation itself. Von Dobschütz explains it neatly:

A sacred book, like a legal code, calls for interpretation, as a means of bridging the chasm which, in religion as in law, exists between the progressive development of life and the fixed letter. The book and the legal code do not supply all the information that may be required; to many questions, they give no satisfactory answer; while again, they contain much that can no longer be used, and much that to a more advanced stage of thought seems antiquated, erroneous, and objectionable. Interpretation thus comes to be a process partly of supplementing the original record, partly of giving it a new significance.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible was written for particular people of a particular time. It would not do to take this Bible and apply it literally to modern man, for with time, many types of changes have taken place. The environment of men has changed not only from Jewish to Western civilization but from agricultural to industrial; the thinking of men has changed not only from an Oriental to Hellenistic-Western mind but also from a pre-scientific to a scientific mind. The four differences that Mathews gives are:<sup>5</sup>

1. The modern age is primarily scientific and controlled by the conception of progress.
2. A second and closely akin characteristic of the modern world is its conception of God as immanent in this process rather than an extramundane monarch.
3. If possible an even more remarkable characteristic of our day is the growing sense of social solidarity.
4. And, finally, another characteristic of our modern world is its refusal to accept authority or metaphysical deduction as the basis of truth.

These differences make it imperative that the Bible be interpreted so that it has relevance to modern man.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst von Dobschütz, "Interpretation," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, VII, p. 390.

<sup>5</sup> Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man* (New York, 1912), pp. 36-54.

The church must preach some form of theology, and theology in the final analysis is the result of an attempt of the thinkers of an age to make religion intelligible to their fellows. It is the correlation of the facts of religion with the other things they know.<sup>6</sup>

Mathews urges the importance of this matter in a crusading spirit, for he sees the situation as "a matter of life and death for both the church and the new social order."<sup>7</sup> He feels that unless the church defines rightly its attitude toward formative forces now at work, unless it leaves off archaic world-views and interprets Christianity in the light of the present world-view, it will be ignored by scholarship and have no dynamic role to play in shaping the forces that will make a better tomorrow.

When, therefore, the church insists that in order to become one of its members one must assent to a series of doctrines embodying the cosmology, the psychology, and the philosophy of the New Testament taken literally, it inevitably sets up a test which will compel a man under the influence of to-day's scholarship to abandon not only a life of evil thinking and of evil action, but also the results of his education. The church in standing uncompromisingly by anciently formulated dogma as an expression of the facts of religion as known in the life of Jesus and in human experience is also standing for a philosophical world-view, for scientific conceptions, and for a religious philosophy that sprang up in an age that was not only pre-scientific, but was also untouched by the modern ideals of political democracy and social evolution.<sup>8</sup>

This most extraordinary intellectual transition presents to the Christian world a crucial challenge.

There are three ways in which this challenge can be met. Religion can be abandoned. Scientific findings can be abandoned. Religious faith can be tested and, if possible, justified from the point of view of the methods of the new culture. Of these, the first is being applied in large scale to communist states: the second has been made familiar to us in the struggle between orthodoxy and modernism; the third is the method of creative Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Mathews, *The Church and the Changing Order* (New York, 1913), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Mathews, *Creative Christianity* (Nashville, 1935), p. 121.

To Mathews there is no alternative. Christianity must make itself relevant. Its teaching must be shaped according to the social mind and the patterns of society governed by evolutionary concepts.

### *The Solution*

How can the Bible with its outmoded world-view, its eschatology, with its salvation by catastrophe and its strange imagery, with its conception of God as an oriental monarch, be made relevant to modern man ? How shall the Bible be interpreted to make it intelligible for modern man ?

Mathews outlines five steps in his methodology:

(a) The discovery by the methods of historico-literary criticism of the oldest records of the life of Jesus and of the primitive Christian faith.

(b) The comparison of the world-view of the New Testament times with the contents of such records and the classification of the elements of the world-view found in the gospel.

(c) The distinction between such world-view and the positive data of the spiritual life of the gospel it correlates or interprets.

(d) The discovery by comparison and other tests of the elements of such world-view as are actually constructive principles of the gospel in the formulation of the content of the spiritual life in a particular historical situation.

(e) The combination of the positive data of the gospel in accordance with concepts which are the equivalents of such of these primitive constructive and interpretative concepts which have been found to possess more than temporary and pictorial value.<sup>10</sup>

As I analyze what Mathews has written it is easier to classify his method into four basic steps:

1. Establish the historical basis of Christ and his message.
2. Understand the nature of doctrines.
3. Distinguish between the pattern and the essence.
4. Apply the essence to the modern pattern.

We shall follow this outline in our analysis of Mathews' method and interpretation of the NT.

<sup>10</sup> Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man*, p. 72.

1. *The historical basis of Christ and His Message.* Mathews insists upon a historical Christ although he concedes that Christianity might still continue without it.

True, the evangelic message of a God of love who delivers man by reinvigorating him with new spiritual power might still help us even if the Jesus of the New Testament should disappear in the crucible of historical criticism. The religious conception of the universe built up by Christian experience would be still a message of deliverance. Conceivably—but to my mind tragically—Christianity might supplant Jesus. As shaped by the century-long experience of the Christian community, it contains much that is self-validating. Social evolution enlightened by the Christian church would teach us it is better to live in accordance with the supposition that a God of Law is a God of Love, that individual development is not to be stopped short by death, that the spiritual order is superior to the natural, and that a better community is yet to be formed. But, apologetically strong as such a daring, I had almost said reckless, position may be, it is weak indeed when compared with the same teachings backed by an assurance of the trustworthiness of the evangelic picture of a genuinely historical Jesus, the concrete exposition of the supremacy of the spiritual life.<sup>11</sup>

However much we may argue that apart from any historical basis the essential truths of the New Testament are in themselves capable of evoking faith, few of us have so accustomed ourselves to the high altitudes of academic thought as to find it possible to gain spiritual uplift in an alleged historic fact we are convinced has become merely "functional." An empty revolver functions admirably as long as the highwayman thinks it is loaded, but what if he discovers his mistake? History that has lost its historicity becomes, except perhaps among philosophers, of equally dubious value.<sup>12</sup>

Mathews' real contribution is not in the field of source analysis. While he accepts the results of historical criticism, he leans to the less radical results of source criticism. His concern can be seen in the following quotation:

It is desirable to distinguish as far as possible between the real Jesus and those estimates and descriptions with which the New Testament writers present him. But why should we not get positive results from the criticism as well as negative?<sup>13</sup>

The business of a positive theology is not to discover how much

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

of that primitive belief can be omitted, but how much of it is really correlatable with other things we know, and so is capable of being built inductively into a positive message for to-day's life.<sup>14</sup>

What are these positive results of historical criticism according to Mathews? He finds in the oldest sources of the Synoptic Gospels the following picture of Christ:

In their light we must say that he was a person of moral perfection, possessed of remarkable powers to work cures through the evoking of faith on the part of others; a teacher who carried to what, so far as we can see, are their final results, the religious and ethical possibilities and conceptions of humanity; a religious master whose very life was an imperative call to trust in the fatherly love of God; and, although he never explicitly demanded such faith of his disciples, one who regarded himself as such an altogether unique manifestation of the Spirit of God as to be able to deliver men from sin and misery and death.<sup>15</sup>

Along with this very liberal picture of Jesus, he admits a strong emphasis on the eschatological hope.<sup>16</sup> And while he sees two uses of the term "kingdom," he makes the eschatological use swallow up the present use of the term "kingdom." He explains the use of the latter term as a reference "(1) to those who were to be received into the kingdom when it appeared, and (2) to the triumphs he and his followers were winning over Satan and his kingdom."<sup>17</sup> He does not neglect the eschatological elements in the teachings of Jesus as so many liberals have done in the past. However, we shall see how he deals with them in terms of their relevance to modern man.

Having established the fundamental elements concerning Jesus and his message, Mathews can now begin to show how these can be made relevant to modern man.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104, 105.

<sup>16</sup> Mathews, *The Messianic Hope in the New Testament* (Chicago, 1905), p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

2. *The Nature of Doctrines.* His methodology of interpretation really begins here. The first step, though basic, is only preliminary. This second step comes into the heart of his methodology. Before he goes on to his next step he needs to show what he considers to be the nature of doctrines. This is the foundation of his superstructure. This must hold firm or his superstructure will fall.

What is doctrine or theology ?

Strictly speaking there is no history of doctrine, but only history of the men who hold doctrine. The historian of doctrines must be the historian of society, for doctrine is, after all, only the attempt made by the social mind of a given period to make intelligible to itself its religious experience.<sup>18</sup>

The first statement in the above quotation is made repeatedly by Mathews in his articles and books. He means by it, as one can see from his definition of doctrine, that doctrines are shaped according to the social forces operative at the time. Doctrines cannot be understood apart from the social mind of a particular period.

Inherent in the definition of doctrine is the distinction between the basic religious attitude and its expression (doctrine).

To put the matter more distinctly, theology is the outgrowth of the needs of religion for intellectual expression. Wherever religion is practised it is forced to meet the needs set by the social life of those to whom it ministers.<sup>19</sup>

Doctrine, then, is something transient, fit only for one particular epoch. It becomes out-of-date when a new social mind is developed. But if doctrine gets out-of-date, then that of which it is an expression is permanent. This is the basic religious attitude.

A study of the origin and purpose of our doctrines shows how patterns have originated and served actual needs of a group. By them attitudes and convictions are given expression in doctrines.

<sup>18</sup> Mathews, "A Positive Method for an Evangelical Theology," *The American Journal of Theology*, XIII (1909), 41.

<sup>19</sup> Mathews, "Generic Christianity," *The Constructive Quarterly*, II (1914), 705.

But they are not of necessity the same. Convictions are individual; doctrines are social. Convictions inspire attitudes; doctrines are "accepted." Convictions are to be expressed dramatically as well as intellectually; doctrines are analogies and social patterns raised by common usage and group authority into symbols of convictions. Through a knowledge of their origin and a sympathetic interpretation of patterns used in doctrines we discover the basal attitudes and convictions they express. And these are more fundamental than their expressions.<sup>20</sup>

History of doctrine, then, being a history of society and its changing social mind, is a study of a constantly changing subject. Doctrine not only changes, but should change if Christianity is to be relevant. And if doctrine is only an expression to fit a particular period it has no relevancy, authority, or significance for the next period. The creeds and the formulations of doctrine throughout the history of the church are as outmoded as its social mind or world-view is to ours. There is no need to consider them in our day. All that needs to be done is to recover again the essence, the basic religious attitude, and with it the social mind of our day and shape our doctrine or theology to fit the modern mind.

Since doctrine, though a part of our religion,<sup>21</sup> is not to be identified with our religion, it stands to reason that the important question is not whether it is true or not. If it is simply an expression of our convictions or attitudes molded to fit a particular social mind, it is expendable.

From such a point of view the ultimate test of any doctrine is not absolute, but pragmatic—that is to say, its capacity to indicate the deepest faith and the moral conduct of that group of Christians by which it is drawn up.<sup>22</sup>

In every case the definitive question is not whether a doctrine is true but how successfully it co-ordinates religious experience with unquestioned beliefs and thus satisfies men's search for satisfaction and courage in the pursuit of the ends they seek to realize.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* (New York, 1924), p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Mathews, "Doctrines as Social Patterns," *JR*, X (1930), 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.



A doctrine is true if it effectively expresses the attitudes of Christians for their generation. Thus Mathews can define heresy simply as the belief of a defeated party. "If it had succeeded it would have been orthodoxy. . . . The decisions reached by the fathers of orthodoxy were usually nearer the truth than the views proposed by heretics, but their survival was due to vital social forces rather than academic discussion."<sup>24</sup> Orthodoxy simply becomes the view that most effectively expresses the attitude of Christianity to a particular social mind.

If all this is true, then the history of doctrine will coincide with the history of society.

Doctrines, when analyzed according to their origin chronologically, synchronize with the creative epochs of European history. And what is of even more significance, they strikingly resemble the dominant characteristics and practices of the period in which they were finally organized.<sup>25</sup>

This synchronization of doctrine and social mind, Mathews makes in the following manner:

. . . the Semitic which gave us the New Testament and the Messianic drama; the Hellenistic which gave us Ecumenical dogma; the Imperialist which gave us the doctrine of sin and the Roman Church; the Feudal which gave us the first real theory of atonement; the National which gave us Protestantism; the bourgeois which gave us modern Evangelicalism; and the Modern or Scientific-Democratic mind which must give us the theology of tomorrow.<sup>26</sup>

3. *Content and Essence.* Having explained the nature of doctrines, Mathews can now move on to the next step in making the gospel relevant to modern man. If doctrines are temporary and essence is permanent, the next problem is to distinguish the temporal from the permanent, the doctrine from the essence. While it is interesting to study the history of doctrines for this purpose, it is not essential or primary.

<sup>24</sup> Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, pp. 64, 65.

<sup>25</sup> Mathews, "Theology from the Point of View of Social Psychology," *JR*, III (1923), 340.

<sup>26</sup> Mathews, *The Constructive Quarterly*, II (1914), 707, 708.

The most important thing is to get back to the gospel of Jesus, for there this essence ought to be most clearly seen. But it is not so simple as merely to get back at what Christ taught and said. For the sociological process was present in the time of Christ as well. Christ used the social patterns of his time to express his message. How can we distinguish between form and essence ?

Mathews says that the search for the essence is not to be sought by first determining what is true but by first determining the points of identity between the NT and the world of the first century.<sup>27</sup> This is necessary to see how Jesus and the NT writers have used the concepts of the social mind of that period to effectively express what is essential. Mathews insists, however, that many of these concepts were actually believed to be true. In fact, he says:

A satisfactory interpretation comes only when a description is regarded as fact rather than analogical, axiomatic rather than imagined. When the past spoke of God as a spirit or as a sovereign, when the practices of courtiers and the conceptions of the law-court were employed to describe men's relations with God, such descriptions were not regarded as analogical but as elements in the religious conceptions themselves. That is to say, they were patterns rather than metaphors. . . . Later criticism may discover the analogical character of the pattern, but as long as it brings intellectual serenity and allays intellectual obscurity a pattern is regarded as fact rather than as metaphor.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore where the NT accepts certain concepts as patterns and as essential truths, it is not necessarily the evaluation that we ought to give them today. The criterion is the actual existence of the concept. The criterion is not whether the concept is Biblical but whether it exists.

If the concept appears to be wholly a priori, in no clear way expressive of facts of experience, but is rather the outgrowth of rhetoric, faith, hope, and other emotions; and if it appears chiefly as interpretative and appreciative of what is obviously experience and personality; and especially if the concept in question be one

<sup>27</sup> Mathews, *The American Journal of Theology*, XIII (1909), 37.

<sup>28</sup> Mathews, *JR*, X (1930), 8, 9.

that obviously is derived from a cosmogony or a theology that does not square with historical and scientific facts and processes; it will not be difficult to give it its true value and significance for the constructive and systematizing processes.<sup>29</sup>

Another criterion that Mathews uses to sift the form from the essence in Jesus' teaching is the extent to which he is dependent upon certain concepts to express his teaching. In this he maintains that the conception of God as love is the basis of his ethical teachings and not messianism. Therefore the latter must be only form, not essence.<sup>30</sup>

From this point of view the student of the life of Jesus becomes increasingly convinced that none of the essential teachings of Jesus are dependent upon the messianic scheme as such. Jesus does not use the idea of the kingdom as inclusive of all his teaching. If it be abandoned, his general ethical and religious teaching would not be injured. The idea of the kingdom is a point of contact between himself and his hearers. Could he, conceivably, have been a Greek, it must have been something different. His own experience of God, his own personality, led him to enlarge upon eternal life rather than upon the kingdom.<sup>31</sup>

Mathews then on this basis reduces messianism merely to a pedagogic instrument. It was "the great channel by which the fundamental verities were valued and brought to a generation under the control of messianic expectation."<sup>32</sup> The interpretation was not necessarily incorrect, but its efficiency will be seen only among those whose thinking was controlled by messianism.

What then is the essence of Christianity? What is the essence that the doctrines of successive periods sought to express? Here is Mathews' answer:

It is not difficult to see, back of these successively organized doctrines, the elements which go to make up generic Christianity. Stated as far as possible without the doctrinal forms given them by successive social minds they are as follows:

<sup>29</sup> Mathews, *The Messianic Hope in the New Testament*, p. xix.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

- (1) Men are sinful, and, if they are to avoid the outcome of sin, need salvation by God. (Sin, guilt, and the need of redemption.)
- (2) The God of law is knowable as the God of love, who in three-fold personal self-expression seeks reconciliation with men. (Trinity.)
- (3) God has revealed Himself as Saviour in the historical person, Jesus. (Deity of Christ.)
- (4) God comes into any human life that seeks Him, both directly and indirectly through social organizations like the church, transforming it and making it in moral quality like Himself. (The Holy Spirit as experienced in repentance and regeneration.)
- (5) The death of Christ is the revelation of the moral unity of the love and law of God. (Atonement.)
- (6) Those who accept Jesus as the divine Lord and Saviour constitute a community in special relationship with God. (The church.)
- (7) Such persons may look forward to triumph over death and entrance into the kingdom of God. (Resurrection and eternal life.)<sup>33</sup>

4. *Relationship to the Modern Pattern.* Having established the essence or the permanent elements in Christianity, there remains only the expression of them into our modern pattern. For a belief, according to Mathews, gets theological value only when interpreted.

To be understood a fact must be integrated with some unquestioned social conception or practice. When one is convinced that a fact has a bearing upon actual life the desire to rationalize such a belief leads to the discovery of some inclusive formula which connects it with that which is unquestioned.<sup>34</sup>

Because Mathews sees such a vital relationship between the essence and its expression, it is very necessary for him to find equivalents to these expressions. Messianism may have no relevancy to the modern mind, but its equivalent is important. Thus, since messianism has no relevancy, it is not enough to cast it aside. It must be studied in order to find its modern equivalent. Mathews gives the reasons for this necessity:

<sup>33</sup> Mathews, *Constructive Quarterly*, II (1914), 719, 720.

<sup>34</sup> Mathews, *JR*, X (1930), 8.

For while the method will recognize to the full the fundamental verities of the Christian experience, it will also give full value to historical facts . . . On the one side, this method avoids that assertion of the perpetual authority of interpretative concepts and that dogmatism which have always proved fatal to the spontaneous and persuasive expression of the Christian spirit; and, on the other hand, it avoids that mysticism which belittles the historical facts which really have made Christian assurance possible.<sup>35</sup>

The historical facts in this case are the concepts of messianism. Not only because one must give the historical facts their full value should one find modern equivalents but because it is necessary to find some unifying principle that will have the same redemptive power as messianism.

But in order that it shall have the power which messianism gave it in the first century, an evangelical theology must be something more than an ethic. It must group and unify its data by some great principle that shall give them the same appeal and the same quality as did messianism. And only if it be fundamentally messianic can it be divinely redemptive. For the very heart of messianism in general was that God would deliver his people, and of Christian messianism in particular that he would deliver the believers in the Messiahship of Jesus from Satan, sin, and death, and erect a new kingdom. Any evangelical gospel must do something more than outline a code of duties and a system of metaphysics. It must set forth the regenerating significance of the facts of the gospel. As these facts are the epitome of the redemptive process, so must the general scheme by which they are brought into intellectual harmony with the other things we know be fundamentally redemptive.<sup>36</sup>

While a completely systematized theology is not necessary to the success of an attempt to bring the gospel to the modern man, in the very nature of the case, we must, if possible, find some coordinating principle that on the one hand shall bring the elements of the gospel into harmony with the controlling world-view. If such a unifying thought is to be true to the gospel, it must be an equivalent of the messianic formula. Indeed, the method of equivalency must control the entire presentation of the gospel if it is to be true to its original content. For, as we have already seen, the gospel was not merely a group of truths and facts; it was also the valuation of those truths and facts in terms of messianism in the interest of the spiritual man. That is to say, it was the historical form given to ultimate spiritual realities, which form itself, in so far as it, too, was the expression of the spiritual life, has permanent value.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Mathews, *The Messianic Hope in the New Testament*, p. 320.

<sup>36</sup> Mathews, *The American Journal of Theology*, XIII (1909), 43.

<sup>37</sup> Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man*, pp. 79, 80.

What then are the modern equivalents of the general scheme of messianism "which, despite the unaccustomedness of their formal expression, are obviously contained in our modern world-view ?" <sup>38</sup>

The three most important elements he reduces to the sovereignty of God, eschatology, and salvation. These are only transient patterns and must be translated into modern equivalents.

#### A. The Sovereignty of God.

Sovereignty was an analogy, but it was the most inclusive analogy under which the ancient world which shaped our ecumenical orthodoxy undertook to set forth its conception of God. The modern man with his democracy and his science can hardly be expected to get full value from either the concept or the terms of such a world-view. God is more than a sovereign. He is *God*. Yet sovereignty expresses a reality which cannot be overlooked—God as the ultimate and controlling reality in human life both individual and social. We do not look to Him to find any likeness to the oriental monarch, but regarding Him as immanent Life, beneficently working through, determining and expressing Himself in the age-long process which involves both matter and history, we conceive of Him, not as Process but as the source and guide of all progress. Humanity must submit to and conform to God, conceived of not as politically but as cosmically personal.<sup>39</sup>

To Mathews, however, the sovereignty of God involves more than his general relationship to mankind. As he says above, he considers it as "the most inclusive analogy under which the ancient world which shaped our ecumenical orthodoxy undertook to set forth its conception of God." Involved in this pattern are

... such corollaries as the absolute power of the monarch, decrees, law and its violations, trials, sentences, pardon, reward, and punishment. . . . Indeed, every doctrine of the atonement may be said to be the use of some social pattern expressing a difficulty perceived in God's forgiveness of sinners and of the death of Christ as a basis upon which this forgiveness could be justified.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 82.

<sup>40</sup> Mathews, *JR*, X (1930), 9.

Translated into theological terms, the corollaries involved in this pattern would become the doctrine of sin, atonement, and the deity of Christ.

The abandonment of divine sovereignty means the abandonment of the entire political pattern. Human guilt is the correlate of divine sovereignty and cannot survive its disappearance. And with the disappearance of sovereignty as a literal attribute of God and of guilt on the part of man, the need of satisfying the divine honor or punitive justice also disappears and the death of Christ no longer gets significance as expiation, satisfaction, or vicarious suffering.<sup>41</sup>

These involvements come under the third of these messianic elements and will be discussed under that heading, *i.e.*, salvation.

### B. Eschatology.

What can eschatology couched in these bizarre symbols mean to the modern mind? Mathews sees three things to which they point in our day.

In the first place it was pictorial presentment in terms of catastrophe of what we should call the teleology of social evolution. For it was primarily a politico-social hope. It looked not to a theological heaven, but to a social order, the kingdom of God. Its very heart was confidence in that divine deliverance which God was to give His people by establishing through the national Saviour an actual, triumphant, and ideal society. Catastrophe was only incidental to such a hope. It was simply the way in which the ancient world conceived of God's accomplishing his redemptive purpose in human history.<sup>42</sup>

Eschatology in modern terminology, then, is the hope of the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. It is symbolic of God's triumph in the social order through Jesus and his teaching.

Eschatology, in the second place, included the hope of personal immortality and resurrection. . . . The resurrection was not that of the physical body from the grave, but, if we correctly interpret Josephus, was a formula for expressing the Pharisees' belief in the

<sup>41</sup> Mathews, *The Atonement and the Social Process* (New York, 1930), p. 182.

<sup>42</sup> Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man*, p. 83.

efficient and superior form of individual existence to be enjoyed by the righteous.<sup>43</sup>

How do we square belief in the resurrection with modern man and his scientific and evolutionary concepts ?

Immortality is "a new birth upward; a new advance, a new stage of human evolution; a freer and more complete spiritual personality."<sup>44</sup> In this case

From the point of view of evolution something like the resurrection of Jesus seems to be demanded. For, as has already been said, the course of evolution has not been simply towards the production of new species. It is rather towards the production of decreasingly animal and consequently increasingly free spiritual individuality. It is at this point that the gospel appears to give significance to the process. In a sense almost startlingly true, Jesus is a second Adam. As the first man marked the rise of the new type of individual above the brute, so Jesus reveals the completion of the next step ahead in the process of the development of the spiritual individual. The *a priori* probability that there should develop some life through its identity with the End of the spiritual order made strong enough to conquer the conditions set by our physical limitations, is met by the message that such a life has appeared. The *a priori* probability meets the historical.<sup>45</sup>

The third element which eschatology expressed was that of "the inevitableness of the postponed outcome of forces resident in national and individual character."<sup>46</sup> The pictures of the Judgment Day and of hell can be understood in the axiom "what a man sows, that he shall also reap." It is the inevitability of "pain or blessing as the outcome of character because of God's working in the moral-personal realm."<sup>47</sup>

Punishment for sin then is not forensic but inevitable within the process, not only in the present but also in the future. "The terrible pictures of the Judgment Day and hell have reality back of them. The loss of the body in itself is as truly punishment for those who have 'lived to the flesh' as would

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 235, 236.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.



be the loss of a hand to a pianist." 48 Death simply introduces a new mode of existence where joy or misery will depend on the soul's readiness to live in it. A bad man in a spiritual world will be in misery.

### C. Salvation.

Salvation from the NT concepts of Satan, sin, and death have meaning for us today. The first represents the relentless natural forces that bring so much misery and suffering. Deliverance comes when by spiritual growth and mastery the soul rises superior to these impersonal forces of the universe as it embodies the will of immanent love.<sup>49</sup>

Sin is not a violation of law in the political sense, on the one hand, and does not arise from the corruptness of human nature from Adam's sin, on the other. Concerning this, Mathews says that "human nature is not corrupt, but atavistic." 50 He describes it as "voluntary action opposed to the divine purpose as seen in the steady progress of life up from the vegetable into the animal and so out into the social and ever more personal realm." 51 The grosser sins are cases of voluntary reversions to lower types. He illustrates this by comparing the thief to the animal that prowls by night and "the man who sinks his individual responsibility for wrongdoing in corporations like a wolf that runs with the pack." 52

Salvation is found in harmonizing our life with the life of God. "The fact that such a divinely regenerate life will be ultimately victorious over passion and sin and death, is to-day's equivalent of that removal of guilt which Paul described as justification." 53

Atonement is not sacrifice, ransom, or satisfaction. Atonement is only the explanation of the experience of forgiveness.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>50</sup> Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, p. 98.

<sup>51</sup> Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man*, p. 168.

<sup>52</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

It is an explanation of Christ's vocation as deliverer. "Christ does not save by dying, but he died because he saved." <sup>55</sup>

He could not save without dying; for death was the penalty of sin from which men were to be saved, and the revelation of the possibility of such deliverance could be made only by an actual and typical example of such deliverance. In a truer sense than men have sometimes seen, the Christ bore the sin of the world; for as part of the world in which sin was socialized he bore to the full its outcome of hate and violence and death. <sup>56</sup>

Christ's life and death are a revelation of the manner in which our deliverance can be wrought. Two truths of elemental importance can be seen in Jesus' death. First, there is Jesus' faith in the justice of God's moral order. Thus he accepted as just the suffering involved in the social effects of sin. Man reaps the results of other men's wrongdoing. He also accepted as just that service rendered by love to the higher needs of the world is given at the expense of suffering caused by the sin of others. Therefore though innocent he willingly accepted suffering for wrongdoers. In the second place the sufferings of Jesus exhibit his faith in the love of God. He saw no Reign of Terror in God's kingdom. <sup>57</sup>

Our salvation is wrought when we too exhibit faith in the love and justice of God as we face the sufferings caused by social sins and impersonal evil. We triumph over these forces by faith and by a spiritual life that is in right relations with God, even though like Jesus we may be apparently crushed by these forces.

Where theories of atonement sought to meet the difficulty of God's right to forgive those who deserved punishment, the modern understanding of the atonement is to harmonize evil and God's love. It is to exhibit faith in God's justice and his love in the cosmic process.

Salvation from death is accomplished in the same way as salvation from sin.

<sup>55</sup> Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, p. 155.

<sup>56</sup> Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man*, p. 187.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195-200.

To have a life strong enough through personal relations with God to overpower the force of the "body of death," the survival of animalism, in the moral realm, is to have a life also strong enough to overcome its other result, death.<sup>58</sup>

Death is overcome for such a life, for his victorious personality "is the embryo of that new stage which is made possible by the emancipation of self from the survival of the strictly physiological aspects of the process."<sup>59</sup>

What is that salvation which the gospel of the New Testament asserts can be brought to individuals? We have defined it negatively as deliverance in New Testament terms, from Satan, sin, and death, and in the modern equivalent as deliverance from physical necessity, from the backward pull of the vestiges of past stages of development surviving in the individual and society, and from the collapse of the process of physical development in death.<sup>60</sup>

### *Analysis*

It is apparent from this study that Shailer Mathews is influenced heavily by evolutionary ideas current in his time, the scientific method and its results, sociology, the social gospel, and the liberal presuppositions concerning the nature of Christianity. He accommodates his gospel to every one of these influences.

Concerning his method of interpretation, one is impressed with his similarity to three men—Hegel, Harnack, and Bultmann.

He is similar to the first in his conception of the eternal essence within the changing forms. This, of course, has been very popular in liberal reconstructions of the essence of Christianity.

Aubrey, however, notes this difference from Hegel: "His basis is not on a *a priori* metaphysical, but a social psychological fact; human nature and its needs remain substantially the same throughout the ages."<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless one can see this influence in his fundamental concept of transient doctrine

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>61</sup> Edwin Aubrey, "Theology and the Social Process," *The Process of Religion*, ed. by Miles H. Krumbine (New York, 1933).

and eternal attitude. This is his most important conception. His house of interpretation stands or falls with it.

The similarity of his ideas to those of Harnack consists in seeking to find the kernel of the gospel in the simple teachings of Jesus. There is also some similarity in their concept of form and essence throughout history. Harnack looks for the kernel in "what is common to all the forms."<sup>62</sup> He also speaks of doctrine as against the gospel.<sup>63</sup> But these are somewhat superficial similarities, for while Mathews sees in each changing form an expression of the gospel to a new social pattern, Harnack usually sees a preservation of the essence not in the form but rather in some individuals who have not been blinded by the new forms or who, though affected (Clement of Alexandria), were still able to see the pure gospel.<sup>64</sup> In other words, gospel and doctrine are antithetical. Mathews sees the gospel unaffected by social process, only changing in form or expression to fit the social mind of its period. There is no real development, no change as far as the essence is concerned. Besides his theory of interpretation, his definition of Christianity as "that religion which Christians believe and practice" and "not a hard and fast system of philosophy and orthodoxy"<sup>65</sup> precludes this. He is confident that "Christianity will breed true to itself because it will be developed by groups of Christians whose needs and satisfactions are of the same general type."<sup>66</sup>

In this respect, is not Harnack more true to the facts? Though the theses of both control their conclusions, is not Harnack more realistic here? At least we cannot admit both conclusions. Since there is for Mathews no development and church history can be disregarded, he says that "the great demand today is not so much a manipulation of the inherited theology into some form acceptable to our modern way of

<sup>62</sup> Adolf Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (New York, 1903), p. 16.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>65</sup> Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> Mathews, *JR*, III (1923), 351.

thinking; it is rather a frank disregard of inherited beliefs and a return to the primitive gospel itself. . . ." <sup>67</sup>

The creeds of the church and the history of doctrine are to be studied only to see how the church at different periods expressed its Christian attitude, rather than to find any basis for establishing what is Christian doctrine. There is no importance or authority in the church or in tradition. In fact, inherited theology gets in the way of reconstructing a theology for modern man.

So Harnack would remove doctrine to find the gospel while Mathews would find his gospel in the analogy of the gospel formulated in doctrine. Both seek to separate the essential from the non-essential elements, but the former by removing the intruding accretions and the latter by reducing the analogy to a universal truth.

Another important difference is seen in their consideration of the messianic and eschatological elements. Harnack removes them as simply Jewish elements which Jesus shared with his contemporaries.<sup>68</sup> Mathews seeks to reinterpret them in modern terms. He does not disregard them as most liberals have done. In this he has anticipated Bultmann and his demythologization method. This brings us to a comparison of Bultmann and Mathews.

The common problem of Biblical interpreters throughout the centuries but particularly in modern times is to make the Bible relevant for their age.

Cosmology, demonology, messianism with eschatology and soteriology are elements that modern interpreters feel need to be explained to modern man. Bultmann mentions allegorization, elimination of temporary elements (liberalism), and emphasis on religious experience (history-of-religions school), as previous attempts to do this.<sup>69</sup> Bultmann de-

<sup>67</sup> Mathews, *American Journal of Theology*, XIII (1909), 41.

<sup>68</sup> Harnack, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>69</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. by Hans Werner Bartsch (New York, 1961), pp. 13, 14.

scribes the difference between the methods of older liberals and himself thus: "Whereas the older liberals used criticism to *eliminate* the mythology of the New Testament, our task today is to use criticism to *interpret* it." <sup>70</sup> In this, however, Mathews has anticipated Bultmann by about forty years. Mathews was demythologizing since 1905, as is seen in *The Messianic Hope in the New Testament*. A more complete elaboration of this method is found in *The Gospel and the Modern Man* published in 1910. It is interesting to note that both men are controlled by one idea, Bultmann by existentialism and Mathews by social reform, and that their interpretations always end up with these ideas. This is really the basic difference—the controlling idea in their interpretation. For this reason the historical plays a minor role in Bultmann's thought while Mathews takes seriously the historical elements which he can interpret in terms of social reform.

How valid is Mathews' principle of equivalency or demythologization ?

The first question that must be asked is, "How does one distinguish the form from the essence ?" "What elements do we take as subjects of demythologization ?" It is just at this point where differences abound. Mathews' criterion for distinguishing form from essence is relative because it is dependent on what social mind makes the judgment. Thus what is form in one age may become essence in the next and vice versa. In this case there is no real essence. The fact that there are so many differences in this respect shows that the criterion is questionable.

Again, granted that we are agreed on what needs to be interpreted, how do we determine its meaning for modern man ? Take the question of eschatology. How varied has been its interpretation ! Bultmann, Dodd, Mathews, all have different views. Though Mathews might say that the interpretation is dependent on the current social mind, he seems convinced that it refers to a social order, a far cry from Bult-

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

mann's existential interpretation. Here it seems to me there is danger that interpretation reverts back to allegorization, no matter how scholarly the approach may seem. The kingdom-of-God concept was held by others interested in social matters such as Ritschl, Harnack, and Hermann,<sup>71</sup> but theirs was not the eschatological interpretation that Mathews fashioned. Eschatology was dismissed, not interpreted. The fact that most liberals eliminated the messianic and eschatological elements in Jesus' teachings instead of interpreting them, as does Mathews who has the same presuppositions, makes them seem altogether displaced elements in Mathews' theology. Knowing Mathews' liberal mind, one would have thought that Mathews would have eliminated these elements. Is not the fact that he has not done this evidence that his zeal for social reform has been a controlling concern in selecting these elements for interpretation ?

The principle of equivalency or demythologization is not so easily applied. Equivalents must be carefully selected, but with different social minds this may be impossible. Actually, if we are serious about making equivalents, we need to remythologize rather than demythologize. An interpretation is not an equivalent but an explanation of the meaning of the myth. In this respect there is no principle of equivalency in Mathews' thought; rather, there is only interpretation.

Are messianism and eschatology really interpretable in modern terms ? If myth comprehends suprasensual reality, how can this be interpreted in accordance with a scientific world-view that is immanentist ? As Thieliicke says, "Whenever mythology is translated into scientific and rational terms there is an inevitable loss of meaning and consequent superficiality, which shows the inadequacy of the scientific approach to this kind of truth." <sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> C. C. McCown, *The Search for the Real Jesus* (New York, 1940), p. 261.

<sup>72</sup> Helmut Thieliicke, "The Restatement of New Testament Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 159.

If we cannot interpret messianism and eschatology into modern terms, can we remythologize? Here we run into the same problems, according to Thieliicke. <sup>73</sup> Modern myths are compatible with the modern world-view. There is no element of transcendence, which was the reason these myths were created.

Then how can we make the NT relevant if the world-view which provides the mythological framework of the Bible is not translated into a modern mythology?

Thieliicke's <sup>74</sup> answer is that this can be done not by demythologizing in Bultmann's manner according to science, not interpreting as Mathews does in modern concepts, nor remythologizing, which is not possible, but by interpreting the contemporary myth of NT times in the light of its world-view.

May it not be that this temporal limitation is something more than an incumbrance upon the gospel to be swallowed as it stands? May it not be that it possesses a positive meaning within the Kerygma? May we not go so far as to say that the contemporary myth of New Testament times, with its three-storied universe of heaven, earth, and hell, left open the door for the idea of transcendence? This is what made it peculiarly fitted to express the otherness of God and his intervention in salvation history. For this myth does not assume that the universe is a self-subsistent, finite entity, as does the secular myth. It is for this reason that the secular myth cannot become the vehicle of Biblical truth without disintegrating it. <sup>75</sup>

While Thieliicke is writing an answer to Bultmann, it seems to me that he also attacks Mathews' principle of equivalency.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162-165.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168-172.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.