

## The poor and the rich: Two opposing Christian communities

*Piet van Boxel*

WHEN READING THE NEW TESTAMENT one easily discovers that Christianity in its very beginnings presents itself in a complex variety. The communities which Paul addressed in his letters were mainly of gentile origin, whereas Matthew's community appears to have been entirely Jewish. Luke wants us to believe that the Church originated around the apostles in Jerusalem and from there slowly moved towards Rome, a route that implied its metamorphosis from being a Jewish-Christian community 'having favour with all the people' (Acts 2:47) to becoming the Church of the gentiles. Taking into account their addressees and bound by their own religious perspectives, the New Testament authors preached the message of Jesus either as opposed to the Torah (Paul) or as its final fulfilment (Matthew). According to their own perception, they believed that God's promises regarding the new era were at hand (Paul and Matthew) or only to be fulfilled in a faraway future (Luke). The needs of early Jewish-Christian (or Christian-Jewish) and gentile-Christian communities were actually so different and apparently irreconcilable that, according to Paul's letter to the Galatians, the decision was made to divide the preaching of the gospel:

When they saw that I had been entrusted with the Gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the Gospel to the circumcised . . . and when they perceived the grace that was given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be the pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Galatians 2:7-9)

The different views regarding circumcision as a necessary condition for conversion and the Torah as an indispensable medium for salvation could only be reconciled by a parting of the ways within the early Church. Attempts by theologians to minimize the differences in the beliefs of Jewish-Christian and gentile-Christian communities (i.e. of Matthew and Paul) is contrived and originates in an ideological concept of the unity of the early Church.

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### *Two Jewish-Christian communities*

Different views and beliefs did not only divide Jewish-Christian and gentile-Christian communities, but also come to the fore when we compare the Gospels, which were written in a Palestinian context. The history of early Jewish Christianity is as complex as the history of its cradle in the first century CE. The religious map of the land of Israel in those days was as multicoloured as Joseph's coat. To consider Judaism as a uniform system of values and beliefs which was superseded by Christianity's offering an equally uniform, though different, system of ethics and faith is a view which at present is rejected by the majority of theologians. The New Testament shows a variety of communities different from each other in theological standpoint and eschatological expectations. Although they shared a common tradition, each of the evangelists wrote his Gospel with a particular community in mind, or present, and depicted 'the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us' (Acts 1:21-22) in a way with which his community could identify.

In the following we will analyse one particular text in the Gospel of Matthew (5:42-47) and its parallel in the Gospel of Luke (6:27-36). From the analysis, the two communities will appear to be almost opposite to each other, and accordingly, they differ in their theological perspective, specifically, in relation to their ethical imperatives. In order to explain the differences and the specific features of each of these early communities we will look at the society from which they originated and consider the economic and political situation in Palestine in the first century CE. First we shall examine the New Testament text.

### *A synopsis*

When comparing the text of Matthew with that of Luke it becomes clear that the authors (or redactors for that matter) have used a common source. For our purpose it is not relevant to discuss the various stages which the shared tradition went through in order to establish the *ipsissima verba Jesu* (the historical words of Jesus) and the extent to which Matthew and/or Luke have shaped the tradition in their own redaction. We will concentrate on the differences in the text units as they appear in the following synopsis.

Matthew 5: 42–47

You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be the children of your Father who is in heaven: for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

What the two texts have in common is the commandment to love your enemy. Many theologians of the past have – without taking into consideration the differences in the texts – understood the love for the enemy as the hallmark of the early Church preached to all Christians alike. Stating that neither in the Old Testament nor in rabbinic tradition was such an unequivocal moral principle laid down, they claimed that universal love was not preached until the rise of Christianity. However, when we have a closer look at the different ways Matthew and Luke

Luke 6: 27–36

But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To the one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again. And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish.

Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

present the concept of love for the enemy, the universal dimension of this love, shared by both Matthew and Luke, is much less apparent than some theologians want us to believe.

In Matthew's Gospel 'loving the enemy' is synonymous with 'praying for the enemy'. The love to which Luke's audience is summoned is given a different meaning. In addition to 'blessing' and 'praying for', 'loving the enemy' is linked with various actions: 'To the one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again. And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.' The exhortations to offer the cheek and to give the coat are also found in the Gospel of Matthew, but preceding the text under discussion (Mt 5:38–42). There, these exhortations reflect the condition of the oppressed. In the redaction of Luke, combined with the other actions, the cheek and the coat are given a different context in which people seem to be master of their own situation. The difference between Luke and Matthew becomes even more highlighted when Luke repeats the commandment to love one's enemies and then continues with the explanatory 'do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return'. From the text in the Gospel of Luke it appears that the addressees are neither oppressed nor deprived; on the contrary, they have means and are in the position to lend to those who beg from them. With all their wealth they are told to be merciful. Such is clearly not the case for the Matthean community, which is instructed to be perfect by accepting all evil and injustice.

### *Two different theologies*

The picture of a well-to-do community is confirmed by a number of texts found exclusively in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 12:13–21 Jesus is requested to tell somebody's brother to divide the inheritance with him, to which Jesus answers with a parable of a rich man who is concerned about where to store the crops which his land had brought forth plentifully. He plans to pull down his barns and to build larger ones, 'but God says to him: "Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God' (Lk 12:20f). It is noteworthy that the whole passage is lacking in the Gospel of Matthew, who either did not know the tradition or, more likely, considering the conditions of his community, thought there was no point in conveying this kind of warning to its members. That wealth

and richness was apparently not an issue in the Matthean church is confirmed by various parables, which either differ from or are altogether missing in Luke's Gospel. The parable of the great banquet to which many were invited is a tradition shared by Matthew and Luke. In both Gospels people refuse to accept the invitation. According to Matthew's Gospel, 'they went off, one to his farm, another to his business' (Mt 22:5). In Luke they are portrayed as wealthy people, one having bought a field and wanting to see it, another having bought five yoke of oxen and wanting to examine them (Lk 14:18f). One needs only to visualize how many acres one can plough with five yoke of oxen in order to realize the wealth of the landowner to whom Luke is referring.

Characteristic of Matthew, it would appear, is the parable of the king who wants to settle accounts with his servants (Mt 18:23–35). The first servant brought to him 'owed ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made' (Mt 18:24f). There is no question but that such a parable reflects the economic conditions in first-century Palestine, where because of high taxes large groups of the population lived in poor circumstances and were not able to repay their loans to the wealthy aristocracy. They often had to sell their land and became tenants on their former property. The following parable (Mt 20:1–16) about the householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard (also only in the Gospel of Matthew) seems to allude to these economic conditions. After agreeing a denarius a day with the labourers, he sent them into his vineyard. Then he went out about the third, the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same. 'And about the eleventh hour he found still others standing and he said to them, "Why do you stand here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us"' (Mt 20:6–7). The early community as described by Luke would certainly not have identified itself with these unemployed labourers. The traditions which belong exclusively either to Matthew or Luke seem to indicate that these two early Christian communities differed considerably from each other as far as their financial circumstances were concerned.

Apart from the divergent economic conditions, the two communities are also divided geographically. Luke's early community was called the Jerusalem Church. His theology concentrates altogether on Jerusalem. Only in his Gospel is the child Jesus brought into the Temple by his parents 'to do for him according to the custom of the Law' (Lk 2:27). In Luke 9:51 Jesus begins the only journey of his adult life to

Jerusalem, which will end with the crucifixion. Risen from the dead, he proclaims to his disciples 'that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem' (Lk 24:47). 'Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God' (Lk 24:50-53). In the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles Luke repeats Jesus' last encounter with his disciples with the same emphasis on the central position of Jerusalem: 'And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit"' (Acts 1:4f). After having received the Holy Spirit the community remains in Jerusalem, and only in chapter 8 the situation changes: 'and on that day (i.e. after the stoning of Stephen) a great persecution arose against the Church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles' (Acts 8:1).

The impression that Luke gives in the Acts of the Apostles is that the early Christian community consisted only of the Jerusalem Church. This community is depicted rather idealistically: 'Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common' (Acts 4:32). That things did not always go the way they should is demonstrated in the story of Ananias and Sapphira who sold a piece of property and kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet (Acts 5:2).

Many priests became members of the community: 'The word of God now spread more and more widely; the number of disciples in Jerusalem went on increasing rapidly, and very many of the priests adhered to the faith' (Acts 6:7). The Church was furthermore clearly focused on the Temple, where Peter and John went for their daily prayers (Acts 3:1). The concepts of the centrality of Jerusalem and the sharing of goods by members of the community are both theologically significant, implying that from Jerusalem, salvation spread over the world. Such a theology, however, may well be rooted in reality, depicting wealthy members of a Jerusalem church.

In the Gospel of Matthew we do not encounter the theology of a community which carries the proclamation of salvation from Jerusalem to Rome. Apart from being the city that had rejected the invitation of

the king and killed his servants who came to invite its inhabitants to the marriage feast and was therefore destroyed (Mt 22:66–7), Jerusalem does not play a theological role in the Gospel of Matthew. The risen Christ does not reveal himself to the disciples in Jerusalem. They are told instead to leave for Galilee where they will see him (Mt 28:10). There the Matthean community will be confronted with imminent persecution, as we may conclude from Jesus' warning when sending out the twelve disciples: 'Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony for them and the gentiles' (Mt 19:17f). The content of the message – the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Mt 10:7, 23) – will cause great hostility against them: 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Mt 10:34). The parallel text in the Gospel of Luke: 'Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division,' (Lk 12:51) does not speak of life-threatening hostility, but of disunity which reflects internal conflicts. For Luke persecution will become reality only at the end of days (Lk 21:12), but this is in the future.

### *Historical context*

Although each Gospel may reflect the social and economic conditions of a community at the time of its final redaction, the presentation of these conditions may well have derived from times which go back to the Palestinian origins of that community. One reason for such an anachronistic presentation is the wish to be as close as possible to the situation of the historical Jesus. A second reason is that the community at the time was essentially moulded by earlier experiences from its very beginning. Although Syria or even Antioch may have been the location of the Matthean community at the end of the first century, the Gospel of Matthew itself seems to reflect the very beginnings of the community and its socio-economic conditions outside Jerusalem in the land of Israel.

The centrepiece of the Gospel of Matthew is the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven, which announces the end of the world by God's intervention in history. This proclamation may well have been a reflection of the teaching of John the Baptist and Jesus (See Mt 3:2 and 4:17). The political consequences of this message in the second half of the first century CE, which witnessed the occupation by the Romans, the Jewish revolt and the fall of Jerusalem, cannot easily be overestimated. For such a proclamation implies an attitude of complete

lack of interest with regard to the political struggle of those days between the supporters of the Roman occupying forces and the Jewish opposition to the oppressing regime. Josephus describes the situation preceding the revolt in 66, in the form of a speech made in Jerusalem by Herod Agrippa (28–92), the son of Agrippa, educated in Rome, in order to avert the imminent revolt against the Romans:

Had I found you all bent on war with the Romans, instead of seeing that the most honest and single-minded members of the community are determined to preserve the peace, I should not have presented myself before you, nor ventured to offer advice; for any speech in support of the right policy is thrown away when the audience unanimously favours the worse. But seeing that the stimulus to war is for some of you mere youthfulness which lacks experience of its horrors, for others an unreflecting hope of regaining independence, for yet others perhaps avarice and the prospect of enriching themselves at the expense of the weak in the event of a general convulsion, I, in order to bring these misguided persons to reason and a better frame of mind, and to prevent virtuous citizens from reaping the consequences of the errors of a few, have thought it my duty to call you all together and to tell you what I conceive to be to your interest. If my remarks are not to the liking of any of my audience, pray let them not create a disturbance. For those who have irrevocably determined to rebel will still be at liberty, after my exhortation, to retain their sentiments; but my words will be lost even upon those who are anxious to hear them, unless you all give me a quiet hearing. (Josephus, *The Jewish war* II, 345–347)

Agrippa's words would remain without effect. A civil war broke out, described by Josephus as follows:

The leading men, the chief priests and all the people who were in favour of peace occupied the upper city; for the lower city and the temple were in the hands of the insurgents. [Missiles were constantly hurled, and occasionally there was hand-to-hand combat.] The objective of the royal troops was to capture the Temple and to expel those who were polluting the sanctuary; Eleazar and the rebels strove to gain the upper city in addition to the ground, which they held already. So for seven days there was great slaughter on both sides, neither of the combatants surrendering the portion of the town which he occupied. (Josephus, *The Jewish war* II, 422–424)



Who were these insurgents, called rebels by Josephus? Those who rebelled against the Romans occupying their land and their fellow-countrymen, mainly consisting of the aristocracy and the priestly class, who supported them to their own advantage.

The course of events reported by Josephus gives us an insight into the social relations of first century Palestine:

The eighth day was the feast of wood-carrying, when it was customary for all to bring wood for the altar, in order that there might be an unfailling supply of fuel for the flames, which are kept always burning. The Jews in the Temple excluded their opponents from this ceremony, but along with some feebler folk numbers of the *sicarii* – so they called the brigands who carried a dagger in their bosom – forced their way in; these they enlisted in their service and pressed their attacks more boldly than before. The rebels forced out the royalists, setting fire to the house of the high priest and the palaces of Agrippa and Berenice. They also set fire to the public Record Office, destroying money-lenders' bonds so that poor debtors would no longer be beholden to their rich creditors. (*The Jewish war II, 425–427*)

The poor constituted a considerable part of the population exploited through tax and loan systems by the Romans and their fellow-countrymen. The antagonism between the poor and the priestly aristocracy, which had grown over the years of Roman occupation, came to a climax in the burning of the high priest's house and the public archives. This act of insurrection initiated the revolt ending with the burning of the Temple and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The devastation of the centre of the priestly aristocracy, however, did not dissolve the social and economic frictions between classes. It would take decades before a new ruling class emerged, which was not identical with the priestly aristocracy. The early Matthean community must have belonged to the deprived class in Jewish society. Tax-collectors and gentiles (i.e. Romans) were their enemies (Mt 5:46f) of whom they had heard that one should hate them, which certainly meant fight them. But the specific feature of Matthew's community was that they did not join those who rose against the rich. Instead they were told to love, namely to pray for, those who persecuted them.

### *The kingdom of heaven at hand*

The reason for the political restraint of these poor Christian Jews may well have been their isolated position within Jewish society. The

impulse for such behaviour, however, must have been the message which they were assigned to preach, in other words, that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, a conviction that they shared with many others, including the community of Qumran. Not being in the position to change the political and economic conditions of the day, they were waiting for God's intervention in history, which would put an end to this world. Their prayers have to be understood as intercession for their wicked compatriots who soon would be condemned by divine judgement. Intercessory prayer is not an uncommon feature in apocalyptic writings. The author of 4 Ezra, an apocalyptic, pseudepigraphic work originally written in Palestine around 100 CE, refers to this kind of prayer (4 Ezra 7:102–115) and warns his readers about the time limit of these intercessions, explaining:

This present world is not the end; the full glory does not abide in it; therefore [in the past] those who were strong prayed for the weak. But the day of judgement will be the end of this age and the beginning of the immortal age to come, in which corruption has passed away, sinful indulgence has come to an end, unbelief has been cut off, and righteousness has increased and truth has appeared. Therefore no one will then be able to have mercy on him who has been condemned in the judgement, or harm him who is victorious.

The conviction that the end of this age is imminent transforms the intercession into a last call. This urgency comes clearly to the fore in 2 Baruch, an apocalyptic work written shortly after 4 Ezra. The pseudepigraphic author stresses the proximity of the final judgement:

For the Lord Most High will surely hasten his times, and he will certainly cause his period to arrive. And He will surely judge those who are in his world, and will truly inquire into everything with regard to all their works which were sins. (2 Baruch 83:1–2)

When God's intervention has dawned,

there will not be an opportunity to repent any more, nor a limit to the times, nor a duration of the periods, nor a chance to rest, nor an opportunity to pray, nor sending up petition, nor giving knowledge, nor giving love, nor opportunity of repentance, nor supplicating for offences, nor prayers of the fathers, nor intercession of the prophets, nor help of the righteous. (2 Baruch 85:12)

It is in such a context that the Matthean community is to be situated. The emphasis on the poor and the aversion to Jerusalem as expressed in the Gospel links the community with the masses oppressed by their wealthy compatriots and the Roman occupiers. While they did not join the rebels they did, however, announce the kingdom of heaven. In their view there was still time for loving their enemies by intercession, even though the end of the world was near: 'Truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes' (Mt 10:23).

The community which is addressed in the Gospel of Luke may be considered to be diametrically opposed to the Matthean community. Originating from the Jerusalem establishment, they were summoned to desist from exploiting the masses, and to be generous with their wealth. The commandment to love their enemies consisted of generosity and mercy. Far from being universal, the divergent ethical imperatives seem to address two almost diametrically opposed communities, which are rooted in the two conflicting parties in Jewish society in the first century CE. Both communities are summoned to love their opponents with the means available.

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