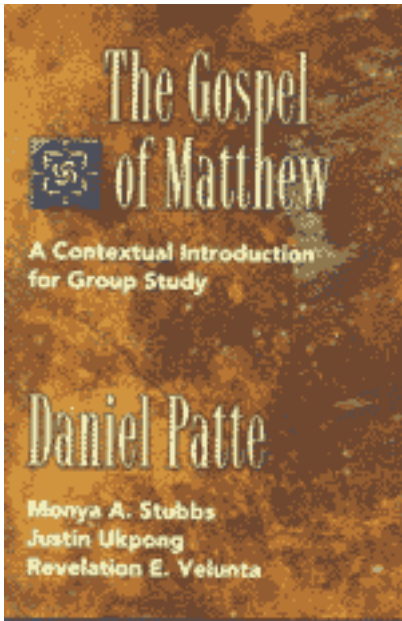


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**Patte, Daniel, Monya A. Stubbs, Justin Ukpong, and Revelation E. Velunta**

***The Gospel of Matthew: A Contextual Introduction for Group Study***

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Daniel Patte is one of the most competent advocates for structuralism. The following published works expatiate his views: *What Is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), *Structural Exegesis: From Theory to Practice* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), and *Paul's Faith and the Power of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). In *The Gospel according to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), he applied his methods to an entire Gospel.

One of Patte's contributions has been to take structuralism, which is often swamped in lofty theories and technical terminology, and to clarify it. For this reason, G. Stanton praises Patte's Matthew commentary because "he eschews jargon and every paragraph is admirably lucid" (*Interp* 43 [1989]: 184). Similarly, J. Kingsbury says, "Patte is to be commended . . . for devoting the bulk of his book not to abstract theory but to a discussion of the text of Matthew in terms of principles that are clearly explained in an initial chapter only fifteen pages long" (*JBL* 107 [1988]: 756). But while scholars have been enlightened, D. Black observes, "It is difficult to assess the commentary's value to the non-scholar or the busy pastor seeking help in the preparation of messages based on Matthew's gospel" (*CTR* 3 [1988–89]: 219).

Appropriate for Black's concerns, Patte and three colleagues have produced a Bible-study guide on Matthew "useful for undergraduate colleges, seminary New Testament classes, and adult Bible study groups" (7). They have distilled structuralism down to principles applicable to the weekly Bible study. Structural theory is not overtly discussed in this book, and nonscholars would be hard-pressed to detect Patte's structuralist theories without prior knowledge of his hermeneutical system.

The first three chapters meticulously guide the reader through a three-step Bible-study process using Matt 5:3–12 as the model text. The authors' method centers around forming "roundtables" for group discussion. Three sets of such discussions are planned where the teacher is discouraged from "lecturing" and encouraged to stimulate maximum student participation. Chapter 1 fleshes out the first roundtable, which emphasizes full preparation leading to full participation. Every participant is encouraged, even required, to share her own, personal interpretation of the text. Chapter 2 describes the second roundtable discussion, which incorporates interaction with published interpretations. These publications, however, are not only the most scholarly. Patte says that he and his co-writers "deliberately selected existing interpretations that have quite different perspectives on the text" (13). The third chapter describes the third roundtable, where the most potentially emotional phase emerges as participants assess each interpretation for its textual and theological validity. Based upon this assessment, application will be drawn out. Chapters 4–6 repeat this process more quickly using Matt 15:21–28; 28:16–20, and the entire Gospel of Matthew as further exemplary texts.

Patte and his co-writers have a good plan in *The Gospel of Matthew: A Contextual Introduction for a Group Study*. The format makes the book easy to read; helpful charts and sample exercises make their approach accessible. Little space is wasted. They lay down a more rigorous, specific, and critical approach than most inductive Bible studies require. Grounding one's interpretation in the text is a high priority; exegesis drives interpretation. The authors insist upon open, active participation by all, and the roundtable method is designed specifically and perhaps entirely to facilitate this. Nonparticipation driven by fear, they say, is a "symptom of a disease that paralyzes readers of the Bible" (11). Any experienced Bible-study leader will agree. In many ways, their book offers a better cure than most Bible-study guides on the market today. It will challenge the most experienced interpreter yet can work for the greenest believer.

Several concerns do arise from the approach, even without prior knowledge of Patte's structuralism. Two will be raised here. The first concern relates to subjectivism and relativism. In order to encourage maximum participation, Patte insists that "in such roundtable discussions, *all* interpretations of the Bible are *legitimate* interpretations until proved otherwise" (23, emphasizes original). At the end of the introduction he states, "The

goal of approaching Bible study through a set of roundtable discussions is not to reach a conclusion about which interpretation is the best in all circumstances, but to recognize that which is best in a particular situation to a particular people” (14). He later clarifies his position asking, “Does this mean that everything goes? No. That no interpretation is ‘better’ than others? No” (82). Patte then offers two criteria for assessing the validity of an interpretation: (1) How grounded is the interpretation in the text itself? (2) How consistent is the interpretation with the principles of loving God and loving one’s neighbor? The difficulty here is that these criteria are still too general. What does it mean for an interpretation to be “grounded” in the text? Is textual meaning based upon the author’s intent and circumstances or the reader’s? And what are the criteria for determining what it is to be “loving”? Different cultures and even different individuals will disagree as to what being “loving” means. They may even disagree as to which “God” is being loving. In practical application, these criteria will fail to insulate a roundtable group from degenerating into an “everything goes” affair. Experienced Bible-study leaders see this happen even when more stringent criteria are applied.

The second concern applies mainly to the average, confessional Christian seeking to do a Bible study in her church based upon this book. The authors forward a variety of interpretive options that would surprise, even shock, a confessional Christian. Alongside the more “traditional” interpretations of a W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison Jr., whom they identify as representing “literary criticism” and “redaction criticism,” the writers place Alice Walker’s “liberation” interpretation, Clarence Jordan’s “consequentialist” view, and Georg Strecker’s Kantian perspective. Even more striking, in the roundtable example for interpreting Matt 28:16–20 they encourage a textual comparison between the Gospel and the Buddhist Mahavagga. A chart places the two side by side for positive comparison (129). Apart from the validity of comparing two wholly unrelated texts, perhaps the greater issue lies in the way this approach leads to interpretive despair. Does a right view of Scripture *require* a multicultural approach? How many cultures must be tapped for a full and proper view? How many subcultures? How many individuals with unique experiences? And are those living in nonmultiethnic nations handicapped in their view of Scripture? Can anyone realistically attain a panethnic perspective? The authors do not address these issues.

Oversimplification is also a danger. How can we know if the chosen authors represent their view and culture? If we have read a liberation author, have we sufficiently covered all that needs to be gleaned from liberation theology? Saying that one has read authors from every continent may give a false sense of security that one has been “multiethnic,” just as reading the five most scholarly commentaries of a book may give an interpreter the false sense that she has been “scholarly.” How much is enough? The more one insists that such an approach is necessary for right interpretation, the more one is ultimately

devaluing the validity of individual interpretation and making a legitimate interpretation unrealizable apart from an impossibly global perspective. But the less one sees this approach as a requirement, the more one wonders as to its value.

What the authors have tried to accomplish is good and noble. Undoubtedly, many have benefited and will continue to benefit from their work. This is good. But perhaps what they ultimately have shown, as has been demonstrated time and again, is the near impossibility of keeping together the two most important aspects of a Bible study: active participation in studying the Bible and the discovery of its objective meaning. Without participation, certainly no “study” will occur. But if the participants are seeking to find any meaning other than the author’s intent, then how are they finding God’s truth, assuming that they believe that the author is God? What meaningful application can result from such a study? How can one use such interpretations as the basis for decisions concerning morality and life? Most who engage in Bible study want more than just a forum to express their opinions and learn interpretive skills. They hope to find God’s objective truths that can serve as the firm basis for guiding every aspect of their lives.