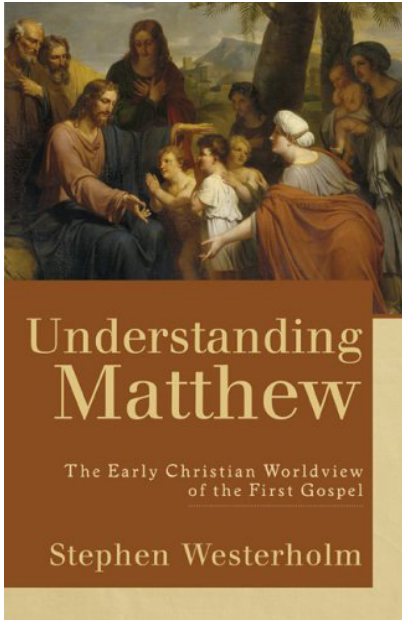


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Westerholm, Stephen

***Understanding Matthew: The Early Christian
Worldview of the First Gospel***

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This book is a companion volume to Stephen Westerholm's earlier book, *Understanding Paul*. Like its predecessor, this slim volume is also aimed at the popular rather than the scholarly market. There is no real discussion of the authorship or the social setting of this Gospel, nor is there any attempt to present Matthew's theology in any systematic or detailed way. Rather, Westerholm's approach is to elucidate in a general way the worldview that underlies the Gospel of Matthew. In doing so, he informs this enterprise in a surprising but welcome way by interaction with and reference to the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was deeply influenced by this early Christian text and tried to live a life of discipleship shaped by the principles expounded in this Gospel.

In the introduction Westerholm begins his work not with Matthew but with the rise of Nazism in Germany in the early 1930s. The appointment of Hitler as chancellor in January 1933 set in train the march to dictatorship that would result in a disastrous world war and the Holocaust (Shoah). While many German Christians were only too willing to join the fanatical and racist cause of the Nazis, there were many dissenters. One of these was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who opposed the Nazis early on and who was imprisoned in 1943 and then subsequently murdered in April 1945, just before the suicide of Hitler. Prior to his imprisonment Bonhoeffer had published a book entitled *Nachfolge* (English

translation *The Cost of Discipleship*), in which he had pondered what it means to be a disciple of Christ. In exploring this theme, Bonhoeffer was heavily influenced by the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7 of Matthew’s Gospel.

Westerholm then turns to the Gospel and notes that it is capable of being read in many different ways and at many levels. While Westerholm understands and affirms this reality, he is also concerned that we readers take into account the authorial intentions of the Evangelist. In this respect Westerholm’s goal is to assist modern readers to understand better the message of the Gospel by delineating Matthew’s particular first-century worldview. He makes the further point that Matthew’s intention to summon readers to a life of discipleship coheres very neatly with the purpose of Bonhoeffer’s writings.

In the first chapter Westerholm defines and analyzes the concept of worldview (the nature of reality) and that of perspective (how we view a particular phenomenon), and he illustrates how these function very differently for a Christian believer and an agnostic. This theme is continued in the following chapter, where Westerholm presents the Christian (and Jewish and Muslim) worldview that God is inherently good and caring, despite the presence of evil in the world, and that we should have complete trust in him. He then turns to the letters Bonhoeffer wrote to his fiancée during his terrible imprisonment, which are replete with statements about his own confidence in the goodness of God.

In the third chapter Westerholm examines the ethical demands of Jesus, especially in the antitheses (Matt 5:21–48), and establishes that their underlying principle is the goodness of God. Again the discussion turns to Bonhoeffer as one who tried to live according to these demands, even though he took the difficult and perhaps extraordinary step to participate in a plot to assassinate Hitler. In chapter 4 Westerholm examines how Matthew, as a Jew, understood the prior relationship between God and his people. He focuses on the key figures of Abraham, Moses, and David and the important event of the Babylonian exile and maintains that for Matthew Jesus is the climax of Jewish history.

This leads into chapter 5 and Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom or reign of God as it appears in Matthew. The mission of Jesus, both in proclamation and in deed, sees the initial establishment of God’s rule in creation, although the kingdom will not be fully ushered in until some unknown point in the future. The death of Jesus on the cross is an integral part of this process that signifies both the faithfulness of Jesus to the will of God and the hostility that God’s reign encounters in the world. But with the resurrection Jesus is granted the power and authority to rule on God’s behalf before the end finally comes.

Chapter 6 is devoted to Matthew's Christology. Westerholm begins with the notion that in the Bible humans have an absolute duty toward God, while in Matthew this duty is extended to include Jesus the Son of God and the Son of Man. The following chapter concerns the notion of discipleship in the Gospel. Here the essence of discipleship is defined as devotion to the Master, which can involve considerable hardship, and the Beatitudes spell out in concrete terms what it means to follow Jesus. Discipleship is not an individual endeavor but must be experienced within the community, the church that Jesus himself established. Turning to Bonhoeffer's view of discipleship, Westerholm notes that he believed that Matthew's distinctive voice on this issue had been distorted by a Pauline understanding that permeated his own Lutheran tradition. For Bonhoeffer, discipleship entailed adherence to Christ with the associated joy of such a life as well as the uncertainties and hardships that it involved.

The final chapter relates directly to the story Matthew communicates. This is a story that describes not only events of the past but also issues an invitation for the reader to follow Jesus. At the very end Westerholm concludes that Matthew and Bonhoeffer share the same vision for life. The world belongs to God, humans are the recipients of God's infinite love, and God was at work in the world reclaiming its goodness in the person and actions of Jesus. The volume ends with a brief index of subjects.

In terms of its intended aims and its intended readership, Westerholm's volume is eminently successful. It provides for the popular reader an engaging and informative discussion of the Evangelist's worldview as communicated in the text. The constant reminder to the reader, often forgotten in scholarly circles, that Matthew's Gospel is primarily a call to active discipleship based upon the model of Jesus, is well reinforced by reference to the life and work of Bonhoeffer, who read the Gospel in precisely this manner. The example of Bonhoeffer proves just how difficult discipleship can be when the human world is at its worst. Despite the Gospel injunction to love one's enemies and to pray for those who persecute us, as well as its prohibition of murder, Bonhoeffer still conspired to assassinate Hitler and to justify his stance theologically by arguing that true discipleship involves directly opposing evil rather than doing nothing. To remain faithful to the will of God in a time of Nazi oppression meant ultimately breaking the ethical requirements in the Sermon on the Mount. Christian ethicists of course continue to debate whether this course of action is defensible, and Westerholm wisely does not enter into this debate, but the appeal to the example of Bonhoeffer brings home in a pointed manner the complexities of discipleship in an uncertain and sometimes wholly evil world.