

The World Is Thus

BY GREGORY A. CLARK

In the Sermon on the Mount we confront our real problems—the anger, lust, greed, lies, egoism, nationalism, and militarism that shape our modern identities, demand our loyalties, and threaten our true and lasting joy. Three recent books allow the Sermon to reorient our imaginations and recall us to Christ’s different gospel.

In the film *The Mission* (1986), the new Portuguese rulers in eighteenth-century South America order an attack on a Catholic community of Guarani people and the Jesuit priests who are protecting the tribe from enslavement. After the massacre, Cardinal Altamirano, a papal envoy who failed to convince the Jesuits to withdraw from their remote mission, confronts a government official:

Altamirano: And you have the effrontery to tell me that this slaughter was necessary?

Hontar: I did what I had to do. Given the legitimate purpose, which you sanctioned...I would have to say, yes. In truth, yes. You had no alternative, Your Eminence. We must work in the world. The world is thus.

Altamirano: No, Señor Hontar. Thus have we made the world...thus have I made it.¹



Context is everything. The context in which we place the Sermon on the Mount determines what it says to us, and it would seem reasonable to place the Sermon in the context of the gospel. So, what is the gospel?

According to a common account, the gospel is the claim “Jesus saves!”

He saves the individual soul from hell, from sin, and from a guilty conscience. But also, because we cannot save ourselves, Jesus saves us from legalism and merit-based systems of earning our way into heaven. That is, Jesus saves us from Judaism.

The Sermon on the Mount has never fit easily into this framework. After all, it appears to offer a set of laws to Jesus' disciples. Salvation by faith is barely mentioned.

But what about when Jesus says, "You have heard it said.... But I say to you"? Is he not claiming to replace Judaism? And consider the Beatitudes: are they not meant to reduce us to despair at earning our way to heaven?

As it turns out, the answer is "No." Judaism is not what Christians have thought. Scholars now tell us there have been Judaisms of many kinds, and Christianity was originally thought of as one of these, not as a separate "religion." What Charles Talbert notes of Matthew's Gospel applies to early Christianity generally: "Matthew's separation is separation *within* Judaism, not *from* it" (p. 7). Moreover, the practices of Judaism that existed at the time of Jesus and the apostles were not legalistic attempts to earn salvation. They were, rather, responses to a loving God who has freely and mercifully elected them. This reevaluation results from some of the most important scholarship of the previous generation, a reevaluation morally necessitated by the widespread Christian support for the National Socialists prior to and during World War II. That support had theological underpinnings reflected in the account of the "Jesus saves" gospel noted above. Christians should never have said, and they ought no longer to say, that Jesus saves from Judaism.

Each of the three books on the Sermon on the Mount reviewed here exerts considerable effort to show how the Sermon stands in continuity with the Hebrew Scriptures and commentaries. Glen Stassen situates the Sermon in the book of Isaiah, and both Charles Talbert and Dale Allison have at their fingertips a wealth of Jewish sources. This feature alone commends each one of these books to the reader. But each work also moves in its own distinctive direction.

Charles Talbert, in *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004, 148 pp., \$17.99), reads the Sermon as a critique of legalism, understood as the assertion of imperatives without grace. We do not find legalism, he says, in the Jewish call to covenant faithfulness, in the Mediterranean world of the philosophers, or, most especially, in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon does not offer laws or rules for decisions, "except indirectly." Rather, it aims to reshape the character of the hearers/readers through the grace of "verbal icons." A text functions as a verbal icon when "one looks through the lens of the command into the divine will behind the text. Such a vision of God and the divine will is transformative for those who see" (p. 77). Only secondarily and in an indirect way does the Sermon provide guidance for decision making.

Talbert does not often provide historical or hypothetical examples of what these transformed characters might look like, so when he does, it is worth our attention. He gives an example in the context of considering Matthew 5:38-42, “do not retaliate against one who is evil.” Consider two people, one without a transformed character and taking Jesus words as law, and the other with transformed character having been shaped by the verbal icon. Each character witnesses the mugging of the man in the story of the Good Samaritan. The one who takes Jesus’ words as law “would likely have waited until the attack was over, the robbers gone, and then made his way to the victim.... However, he would have acted improperly, because love of the neighbor was not central to his behavior.” By contrast, “a character shaped by the Matthean Jesus’ priorities...would likely have taken his staff, cuffed the robbers about their ears and driven them off, and then gone to the man.” Thus, “there may be occasions when love of neighbor trumps one’s commitment to non-retaliation” (p. 92).

The illustration left me with a flood of questions: Who are these people? What are their home communities? Are those communities built with their principal aim as maintaining covenant faithfulness? How did that person with the transformed character learn to wield that staff so well? And who carries a staff anymore?

As I write this we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1957. And so, I cannot help but allow my mind to wander and wonder. Perhaps the person being beaten is a Civil Rights marcher. Perhaps the people beating him are members of my own community, with whom I speak and eat and attend church on Sundays. Now, who is my neighbor? And to whom am I to be a neighbor? Why did good Christian people not defend those marchers? Surely, it was not that the bystanders were pacifists. Why did those marchers not defend themselves – or the demonstrator next to them? Surely, it was not that the demonstrators were legalists. Why wasn’t anyone handy with a staff anywhere near?

Until we are told more about the specific faith community in which their actions and characters are rooted, I do not see how it is possible to tell what actions followers of Jesus would perform or how their actions are related to the words of Jesus. Talbert’s notion of a verbal icon can usefully free up a text from simplistic, legalistic readings. Verbal icons can be effective, even necessary, tools for teaching and for shaping character. However, they cannot perform the task in isolation from actual,

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living communities that reflect upon and reflect back those icons.

Among the many virtues of Dale Allison's *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999, 176 pp., \$19.95) is attention to how our native communities situate our interpretive strategies.² This feature of his work adds depth to his reading. If we locate readings in communities, we can no longer simply distinguish between

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the theological and the political. Rather, Matthew "at the very least" indicted some of the political movements of his day (p. 96). Further, Allison's cognizance of the history of Christian interpretation prevents him from calling the pacifist reading "puzzling." Instead, he acknowledges the many Christian interpreters who cited Matthew 5:38-42 as support for pacifism. These interpreters usually belonged to minori-

ty communities and were more common before the time of Constantine. Finally, Allison's awareness of discussions among pacifists keeps him from equating pacifism with passivity, as Talbert's illustration presupposed.

But Allison is no pacifist, and he does not prefer the pacifists' reading of these passages. He claims that pacifists are literalists in their reading strategies. They take Jesus to be offering a set of principles or laws which are supposed to have direct application in our own communities. But they fail to acknowledge the real difference that exists between their native communities and those of Jesus and Matthew. Consequently, pacifists read without the work of imagination that would bridge the two communities. The result is often unsustainable and sometimes absurd in the real world.

Put differently, pacifists are not realists. They do not recognize that in our present communities we must sometimes choose between two evils. Like Talbert, he wonders, "What do we do when there is a conflict between love of neighbor and love of enemy?" (p. 97). Other times, those of us in the real world are caught between two goods: say, the good of government and the good of being Christian. Those who "have found themselves both Christians and members of governmental organizations...have necessarily found new ways of understanding Matthew 5:38-42" (p. 98).³

These two criticisms, literalism and lack of realism, then, reduce to one: pacifists fail to acknowledge the reality of one's own culture as a necessary and determinative dimension of Christian action. "We do not live within the

first-century world of Jesus or Matthew or share their culture or participate in their forms of government. We live rather in the age of capitalism, democracy, secularization, and technology – modern realities that shape our identity” (pp. 174-175).⁴

An adequate response to Allison’s reading of the Sermon would include an alternative Anabaptist reading. This alternative reading would need to mark out a strong line of continuity with Jewish traditions, give a full account of the Sermon on the Mount in its contexts, and establish itself as thoroughly realistic. It should provide a reading that is neither legalistic nor literalistic. We find such a reading in Glen Stassen’s *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006, 201 pp., \$21.95).

While Stassen steers clear of legalism and literalism in his reading, these do not constitute his primary concerns. Legalism and literalism do not pose the greatest threats to our understanding of the Sermon, and Jesus has not come to save us from these. The antagonists in Stassen’s reading are, first, Greek idealists. Greek idealism (and not Jewish legalism) is the “human effort to make ourselves perfect and live up to what seem like impossibly high ideals” (p. 15). In contemporary culture this is complemented, second, by the “backwash from the Enlightenment...[that] does not expect God to do new things” (p. 16). Like legalism and literalism, Greek idealism and the Enlightenment are inadequate solutions for our real problems.

Our real problems are sin and death. Anger, lust, greed, lies, egoism, nationalism, and militarism make up our daily lives and threaten our true and lasting joy. These may be given form by capitalism, democracy, secularization, and technology; the resulting institutions may shape our modern identities, but they are not morally or religiously neutral. They demand our assent and our loyalties. They are “necessary.” “The world is thus.”

Dale Allison suggests that we bow to necessity. “Rather than condemning the exegetical changes brought by the Constantinian revolution we should regard them as inevitable and consistent with the fact that the Sermon on the Mount offers examples that call the moral imagination into play” (p. 98). This view of the inevitable betrays a lack of imagination, and Stassen worries about its implications:

I believe that if we do not see how Jesus’ teachings are rooted in the Old Testament, we treat them like flowers that have been pulled out of the soil and displayed in a vase of water. They get thin, or even lose their life. Similarly, when the teachings of Jesus are uprooted and we plant them again in our own soil. They take on the meaning we put into them, rather than retaining their real meaning. We shape his teachings to fit the distortion of our own interest: greed, militarism, nationalism, racism, individualism, and rationalization of what we wanted to hear Jesus say. (p. xv)

Stassen's apparently conservative hermeneutic makes him more politically radical and more theologically potent. He locates Jesus in "the realistic tradition of the Hebrew prophets" (p. 40). They are "realistic" in three senses. First, they harbor no illusions about the anger, lust, greed, and violence behind and in people's actions (p. 62). But they are also realists in that they

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tell us that God will deliver us, and that we can participate even now in God's reign. Finally, "Jesus' teachings are realistically purpose-driven" and will have results in the real world (p. 98). Stassen can support his point not with hypothetical examples but with historical illustrations: debt forgiveness, tax reform, Clarence Jordan, Alabama governor Bob Riley, Bul-

garian Baptist minister Parush Parushev, Martin Luther King, Jr., Quakers, family and friends, and the list goes on. In terms of concreteness, practicality, and contemporary application, Stassen's work far exceeds the others. Those who think that Jesus' Sermon does not make sense in the real world may well be operating out of idealism.

For Stassen, context may be everything, but it is not the only thing. The text has its own meaning, and that meaning can speak powerfully enough to reorder our present context. If Jesus saves, it is because God reigns and Jesus is Lord. Jesus is necessary and inevitable for the Christian imagination in ways that the nation-state, capitalism, technology, and even democracy are not. And that is a different, more original gospel.

NOTES

1 *The Mission*, written by Robert Bolt and directed by Roland Joffe (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1986).

2 Virtues which deserve mention include these: Allison draws distinctions swiftly and with clarity. He draws on the depth of the Christian tradition as well as providing context in Jewish traditions and sometimes in Hellenistic traditions. He is measured in his conclusions, not stating them more strongly than his argument has warranted and explicitly recognizing that reasonable and honest people may disagree. More specifically, I found his discussion of lust quite helpful in the context of modern debates (pp. 71-77).

3 From the perspective of the believers' church, this begs the question: no one just "finds" herself a Christian, for to become Christ's disciple requires her consent and commitment.

4 The source for this critique, Allison acknowledges in his final chapter, is H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951). Allison considers the "Christ against Culture"

model—the view that culture is totally corrupt and must be avoided, which Niebuhr attributes to a range of Christians from Catholic monastics to Anabaptists—as a primary threat to a workable understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. For a critique of Niebuhr’s typology from an Anabaptist perspective, see Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996). Niebuhr’s general framework lives on in current accounts that define fundamentalism as a denial of the modern world, a denial that nonetheless ties it to the modern world. Fundamentalists of all stripes, it is said, want to start with revelation or with God, etc., but their attempts to deny the modern world are unsustainable and absurd because the modern world is the real world.



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