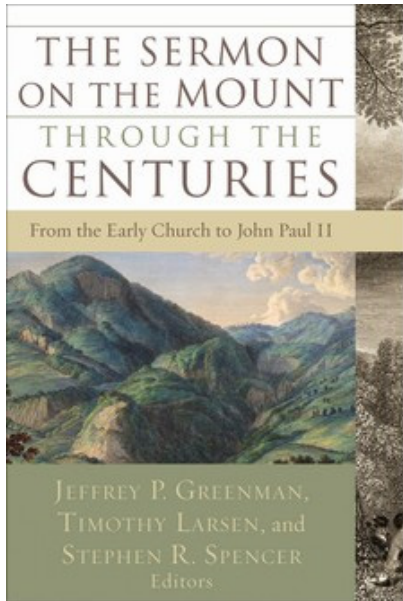


RBL 06/2009



Greenman, Jeffrey P., Timothy Larsen, and Stephen R. Spencer, eds.

The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries: From the Early Church to John Paul II

Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2007. Pp. 280. Paper.
\$24.99. ISBN 1587432056.

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The editors, all professors of theology at Wheaton College, contend that an ideal way to explore the history of Christian thought is as a conversation with Scripture. The Sermon on the Mount, widely considered to be the heart of Jesus' teaching, is chosen as that part of Scripture with which to allow Chrysostom, Augustine, Hugh of St. Victor, Dante and Chaucer, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Spurgeon, Bonhoeffer and Yoder, Pope John Paul II and Leonardo Boff, and John R. W. Stott to engage. The objective is to see how these individuals in church history read the Sermon on the Mount, given their time and place both culturally and ecclesiastically. The book's aim is not to sketch out the modern quest for the meaning of the Sermon involving key New Testament scholars, as, for example, Clarence Bauman, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for Its Meaning* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1985), has done. The concern here is not with New Testament scholarship; it is with historical theology, using interpretations of the Sermon as an entry point into a variety of theological-ethical systems.

Margaret Mitchell of the University of Chicago, a recognized specialist in patristic exegesis, writes the chapter on John Chrysostom, using homilies 15–24 in the set of ninety that John wrote on Matthew. Within the cultural context of the philosophical pursuit of the virtuous life, with the aim of healing souls, Chrysostom regards the Sermon

as a homily advocating a way of life or philosophy that is superior to all others. It is addressed to disciples and through them to all. Within an ecclesiastical context, John's aim is to democratize monastic virtues into the urban laity of Antioch and Constantinople around the turn of the fifth century. The commandments, he says, are not impossible to attain.

Robert L. Wilken of the University of Virginia and a noted patristics scholar does the chapter on Augustine, based on this church father's verse-by-verse commentary on every pericope in the Sermon and on scattered references in his later writings. The Sermon is viewed through the prism of the church's faith. Its aim is to provide a workable guide to life for mature Christians. Be like God. The hermeneutical principle followed throughout is never to interpret a biblical text without citing another. The beatitudes are seen as gifts of the Spirit, namely, the seven of Isa 11 (with the eighth beatitude repeating the first). These attitudes and actions lead to perfection. They are stages on the way that lead to God. They are the means to bring us closer to God. They are possible to achieve by the love of God spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us.

Boyd T. Coolman of Boston College and a specialist on Hugh of St. Victor presents the chapter on this twelfth-century Augustinian figure, based on Hugh's *On the Five Sevens*. The first of the five sevens presents the malady, the disintegration of the self by vice. The following four offer the remedy. Of the four, three focus on the Sermon: the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer; the seven virtues of the beatitudes; and the seven rewards of the beatitudes. The Lord's Prayer is the foundation of the remedy. Christians pray for divine assistance. Each petition of the Lord's Prayer counteracts a particular vice. This produces a reintegration whose center is the soul's interior love for and delight in God as the highest good. The remedy, then, is christologically grounded prayer for pneumatologically facilitated grace. Gradually, step by step, the soul's desires are recentered on God instead of vice.

David Lyle Jeffrey, Distinguished Professor of Literature and Humanities at Baylor, a prolific medievalist, writes a chapter that deals with both Dante and Chaucer. Neither of these individuals manifests a direct engagement of the biblical text. Dante employs the Matthean beatitudes in his pilgrim's purgatorial education, the goal of which is a state of beatific vision. Five of the beatitudes redress a dominant vice: for example, poor in spirit counters pride, showing mercy counters envy, making peace counters anger, and purity of heart counters lust. So the beatitudes are understood in terms of the expurgation of contrary vices. Chaucer finds in the Sermon primarily a key to the moral appropriation of Scripture for personal and social action, that is, works meet for repentance in this present life. It becomes the exegetical cornerstone in terms of which all Scripture finds its focus.

Susan Schreiner of the University of Chicago and a specialist in the Protestant and Catholic Reformations offers a chapter on Luther, based on the Reformer's commentary on the Sermon drawn from earlier sermons on Matt 5–7. For Luther, the Sermon was fundamentally about the difficulty of living the Christian life within the world. It took the form of a polemical call for battle against all enemies, particularly Satan. Luther's exegetical method rested on the proposition that the human condition before God has never changed over time. The Sermon presupposes the doctrine of justification. Having been justified, the believer should then turn to the Sermon in order to find ethical instructions about living the life of faith. The Sermon is for all Christians, not just monks and Anabaptists. The Christian who reads the sermon is two persons, spiritual and secular, each of whom moves in its proper sphere.

Stephen Spencer of Wheaton College, one of the editors of the volume and a Calvin scholar, writes the chapter on Calvin based mainly on the reformer's *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*. His aim as an interpreter was to lay open the mind of the writer whom he undertakes to explain. Calvin listened to Scripture as both human and divine. Regarding the former, he viewed the Sermon as a collection out of Jesus' various discourses. Matthew 5–7 is basically the same discourse as that in Luke 6. The two Evangelists begin with an account of a single discourse and alter it. Regarding the latter, the Sermon is doctrine related to a devout and holy life. Its commands are not always to be taken literally or at face value. In the face of Anabaptist rigor, Calvin often moderated the demands. A major emphasis was the relation between the old and the new covenants. For Calvin, the covenants are not antithetical. Christ is not a new legislator but a faithful expounder. The perfection about which the Sermon speaks is defined by the object that Christ presents in himself.

Mark Noll of Notre Dame, a senior historian of evangelicalism, writes on John Wesley, basing his analysis on the thirteen sermons on the Sermon on the Mount in Wesley's *Standard Sermons*, a summary of his own Methodism and all true religion. Matthew 5–7 played a key role in Wesley's lifetime effort to champion a religion marked by both free grace and practical holiness. It was holiness active in faith. Grace for Wesley was more than forensic pardon. It was experienced as actual influence, empowerment by the energy of grace: prevenient, saving, sanctifying, sacramental. In Matt 5 he found the sum of all true religion, in Matt 6 the rules for right intention that are to be preserved in all one's outward actions; in Matt 7 he found cautions against the main hindrances of religion. Wesley's hermeneutic involved the citation of, allusion to, paraphrase of, reference to other parts of Scripture as the primary way of expositing texts. This reflected his conviction that the Sermon represents a natural development of Mosaic teaching.

Timothy Larsen of Wheaton, a specialist in nineteenth-century religion in Britain, is the author of the chapter on Spurgeon, based in large measure on Spurgeon's *The Gospel of the Kingdom: A Popular Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew* and twenty-five earlier sermons on the beatitudes. Spurgeon's deepest desire was that his preaching on the Sermon would occasion spiritual conversion and moral formation in the auditors. In doing so, he used medieval allegorizing, evangelistic preaching, charismatic ministry, and gender-inclusive language to that end.

Stanley Hauerwas of Duke, a prolific ethicist and popularizer of John Howard Yoder, produces the chapter on Bonhoeffer and Yoder. The thing that made the Lutheran and the Mennonite allies was their stress on the visibility of the church. Both agree on the need for the church to be a visible alternative to the world. Their reading of the Sermon on the Mount is what is necessary to enable this. It is a manual for discipleship. It provides the very form of life necessary to witness to the reality of the new age begun in Christ.

William T. Cavanaugh of the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis and a specialist in political theology produces the chapter on Pope Paul II and Leonardo Boff. The contrast between the two men's understanding of law and eros is what holds the chapter together. For Boff, the Sermon on the Mount was the historical moment when God blew the lid off the creative energies that had been repressed by law. Eros is a push from something innate in human desire. For Boff, the Sermon is about the liberation of the oppressed. For Pope John Paul II, the Sermon leads what went before (law) to its fullest potential, interiorizing the demands and bringing out the fullest meaning. The commandments of the law are the foundation out of which the perfection of love develops. Eros is essentially responsive to God's initiative. For John Paul II, the Sermon functions against relativism and skepticism.

Jeffrey Greenman, professor of Christian ethics at Wheaton College and one of the editors of this volume, writes the final chapter, on John R. W. Stott, who together with Billy Graham is the most influential figure in the global evangelical movement since World War II. Greenman's analysis is based in large measure on Stott's commentary on the Sermon, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*. In this book Stott gives a sustained theological reading of the Sermon on the Mount as a cohesive whole. The problem is the church's conformity to the world's standards (remember Bonhoeffer and Yoder). The book's title indicates the perspective from which Stott reads. The key text is 6:8, "Do not be like them." The Sermon on the Mount is the most complete delineation in the New Testament of the Christian counter-culture (differentness). Its demands are attainable only by those who are born again.

Does the volume fulfill its promise? If the purpose of the book was to show how the history of Christian thought involves a conversation with Scripture, this volume has certainly done that. The quality of the authors chosen and the essays produced guarantee a high-level product. What came across to me throughout the essays, however, was how little Scripture controlled a theologian's thought. Rather, Scripture seemed to be merely a tool to be used in the pursuit of a prior theological commitment and system. If I were able to add a chapter, it would be on the contrast between the current reading of the Sermon on the Mount from a liberationist perspective, on the one hand, and that from the perspective of virtue ethics and character formation, on the other.