The Sermon on the Mount

THE CHURCH'S FIRST STATEMENT OF THE GOSPEL

David P. Scaer

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Preface

No other section of the Scriptures has received as much attention as the Sermon on the Mount. In monographs on pericopes to full length commentaries on the gospel, commentators have explored the wealth of materials in these three chapters of Matthew. From the first available post-apostolic writings to the present, the Sermon on the Mount has preoccupied Christians. If no other books had been written except commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount, the lament of Ecclesiastes (12:12), "of making many books there is no end," would have been satisfied.

If Matthew is the first of the gospels, then its influence may be detected in other parts of the New Testament, especially Luke who provided a shortened and in most cases simpler version in his Sermon on the Plain and assigned some sayings to other parts of his gospel. The Sermon on the Mount is a magnet which sooner or later attracts not only biblical scholars but theologians and religious leaders who see their expertise in other areas besides the New Testament. It becomes the required scaffolding on which theologians set forth their own programs and it often finds its way into devotional studies. What commentators find in the Sermon on the Mount generally reflects their own views. In light of what they have written elsewhere, their views on the Sermon are predictable. Explanations of the Sermon on the Mount only reinforce what they said elsewhere. This writer begs no exception for himself in seeing the Gospel as the Sermon's chief content and purpose. My argument is the Sermon on the Mount is Gospel. I do not separate Law passages from Gospel ones and then determine a majority by calculating the columns. Such an approach would only indicate a failure to understand that the Gospel fulfills and assumes the Law and draws its structure into itself. If the Law were not intricately involved in the shape of the Gospel, the Gospel could not be the fulfilling of the Law and it would have no meaning for the hearer, who by nature can understand the Law but to whom the Gospel without the Law is alien. Many of the Sermon's condemnations, like the house which collapses during the flood (7:27), do not belong to what is commonly called the Law, but should be eschatologically understood as divine judgment against

unbelief, a prevalent theme throughout Matthew. Condemnation of sin, resolved in the Gospel, must be distinguished from the condemnation of unbelief for which no relief exists.

While no section of the Bible is immune from controversies emanating from a variety of different and contradictory interpretations (after all, this is the nature of biblical studies), many interpretations of the separate pericopes can be boiled down to a few serious options. Debates over the meaning of "the word was God" in John 1:1 take place today as if the triumph of Athanasius over Arius at Nicea in 325 A.D. had never taken place.[1] Biblical scholars have not really gone much further than the Reformation debate between Lutherans and the Reformed in their failure to agree on the meaning of the word "is" in "This is my body."[2] Today biblical studies cross denominational lines, but differences of interpretations on certain sections of the Bible still tend to fall into predictable categories. Old debates about interpretations keep surfacing in contemporary, scholarly discussions.[3] Newer critical methods do not prevent traditional differences of interpretation over the biblical texts from surfacing like bad pennies.

In the same vein, interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount are not infinite, but they may seem so to anyone who attempts to locate all of them. No serious student of the Sermon on the Mount can escape frustration over the seemingly endless commentaries written to explain it, but nevertheless few offer interpretations which the reader will find surprising or really new. Somehow in reading commentaries on the Sermon, one senses he has gone down these roads before, a critical hurdle which this book also must face.

Even a first-time reader of the Sermon on the Mount approaches it with a sense of familiarity, since even some of its most obscure sayings have a firm place in the modern language. For example, "don't cast your pearls before swine" is used as a kind of friendly gibe that one's words should not be wasted on some people. No one using this phrase would seriously think of tossing real pearls to pigs and few would be acquainted with the options scholars offer. "Blessed are the peacemakers" adorns the walls of the United Nations headquarters in New York City and other governmental buildings. How many people reading them know that they are taken from the Sermon on the Mount? How many recognize that the original context has little to do with international relations? The expectation that people in general should be familiar with the Sermon on the Mount flows from understanding that the teachings of Jesus are hardly more than common

sense proverbs, a heritage of eighteenth-century Rationalism which held that the Bible contained truths which were accessible to everyone. This common-sense approach to the Sermon on the Mount has allowed or even encouraged some to make use of its sayings for purposes which Jesus and the compiler of these sayings would have hardly recognized. Such random application of the sayings of the Sermon on the Mount finds unrequested support in current scholarly opinion that posits a common source for some of the materials in Matthew's and Luke's versions of the Sermon in the hypothetical "Q" document.[4] "Q" never really existed as a written document, but it is regarded as the source of similar or nearly identical material in Matthew and Luke but absent from Mark.

In spite of the multiple variety of approaches to the Sermon on the Mount, nearly all commentators see the Sermon on the Mount as essentially Law and not Gospel, though some do recognize forgiveness as a central theme. Most are agreed that the Sermon on the Mount with its instructions tell us little about salvation by grace. Commentators, whether they are scholarly or popular writers, Neo-Evangelical, Lutheran, Reformed or Roman Catholic, may widely disagree in interpreting the Sermon on the Mount, but most agree that the Sermon on the Mount is a collection of regulations. Ironically viewing the Sermon on the Mount as Law allows non-Christians to make use of it. Differences of interpretation consist in how they define the Law, the possibility of keeping it and to whom it applies. Nearly all its interpreters have in one way or another found in them principles for living and only differed in whether or how these principles are carried out.[5] So for example, following the Reformer, Lutherans are likely to see the Sermon on the Mount as Law incapable of being fulfilled and Roman Catholics are likely to see it as Law which can be fulfilled, at least partially, by all Christians. Those with ascetic discipline can and do reach higher levels of spirituality for which they are posthumously recognized by beatification and canonization as saints.[6] Arminian spirituality, which characterized early Methodism, as it was articulated by John Wesley, and is still typical of the holiness and Pentecostal bodies, sees complete sanctification as attainable. These perfectionist interpretations hold that the Sermon's imperatives are moral demands which can be fulfilled to overcome sin. Others directed the Sermon on the Mount to the ordering of society. Leo Tolstoy applied it to a commune in Russia and failed. During its heyday, early twentieth-century liberal Protestantism found in it a program for improving society. About the same time New Testament scholars suggested that its severe ethics were applicable only

during the life of Jesus or a restricted time period in the early church, when the end of the world was thought to be imminent. They saw the Sermon on the Mount's demands as an interim ethic whose severe requirements have long since expired. Lutherans skirted the Sermon's harsh demands by applying its mandates to the inner spiritual life. After all, no one was expected to amputate offending hands and extract wandering eyes. For them the Sermon's chief purpose was alerting sinners to the enormity of sin and the impossibility of fulfilling God's law. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus appeared as a sterner Moses. True and lasting salvation was not to be found in the Sermon but elsewhere. Here they parted with Roman Catholics and some Protestants for whom the Sermon plays a positive role in obtaining salvation. For Lutherans the Sermon's role in salvation was negative, giving sinners impossible moral goals which could only be resolved in the Gospel (found elsewhere).

If a unique contribution is to be found of this volume, it is presaged in its subtitle: *The Church's First Statement of the Gospel.* The Sermon on the Mount is Gospel in several senses of this word. It is Gospel because its message not only originates with Jesus, but because it is about him. Jesus is the speaker of the Sermon and its subject. Preaching the gospel of the kingdom means that he preached about himself. Matthew claims that Jesus is the speaker of these discourses whose authority is both self-derived and given to him by the Father (7:29; 21:23–27; 28:18). These are not simply human opinions but the words of the God who has appeared in Jesus. Putting into practice the words of Jesus assures salvation to the believer. Failure to do so brings eternal ruin (5:24–27). The Sermon on the Mount, as well as the other four discourses, are also the words of Jesus' disciples who are the first to hear and understand them (13:51) and then as apostles required to preserve and teach them (28:20). The Sermon on the Mount became the church's statement of its faith. Through its teaching or *didache*, she brings believers into her fellowship through Baptism (28:19).

The Sermon on the Mount and with it the entire gospel of Matthew is a record of the preaching of Jesus who is described as going "about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and *preaching the gospel of the kingdom*" (Matt 4:23; also 9:35.) Like John the Baptist, Jesus vigorously preached the Law in condemning man's enmity to God and fundamental immorality, but his preaching was chiefly characterized as Gospel, that is, how God through him would bring salvation (1:21) and accomplish atonement (20:28). Since the Gospel is about Jesus, it also about the God whom Jesus reveals (11:27). In preaching about himself, Jesus preaches about

God, because not only is he the Father's Son, he is God (1:23). What can be said about God in the Sermon on the Mount is first said about Jesus.[7] Hence theology is really Christology and Christology is what the Gospel is all about.[8] It is Matthew's first window into who God is and what he is really like and what Christians will be like in forgiving others.

Perhaps most telling in the argument that the Sermon on the Mount is primarily Gospel in distinction from the Law is Jesus' own description of his ministry which not only includes miracles, especially the resurrection of the dead, but "the poor have good news preached to them" (11:5). To be true to the Greek, it is better to say "the poor have *the Gospel preached* to them." The ultimate sign of the messianic kingdom, with which even John the Baptist must content himself, is that the poor hear the Gospel and are not offended, i.e., they believe in Jesus. Those poor who hear the Gospel and believe are described in the First Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (5:3). In hearing the Sermon on the Mount, they hear the Gospel intended for them and do not take offense in Jesus.

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew did not intend to leave his readers in the impossible position of facing a condemnation which could be resolved only later in this gospel, *or worse in the writings of Paul*! Quite to the contrary! In the Sermon Jesus reassures weak believers of the Father's love for them. Sadly finding solutions for the Sermon's hard sayings in other places is not uncommon. Ironically the most critical scholars of the New Testament come to a similar conclusion in seeing Jesus as a preacher of the Law and Paul as the formulator of the Gospel. For them Jesus was a wisdom teacher or a revolutionary[9]—have your pick—but Paul was the theologian who shaped Christianity by defining the Gospel. If Jesus is both the revealer and revelation of God, Paul cannot be given an honor which belongs in the first sense exclusively to Jesus. This issue is addressed in this commentary in seeing the Sermon on the Mount as Gospel.

In the Sermon on the Mount believers are given a taste of a forgiven life with God which Matthew will unfold in the remainder of his gospel. At its conclusion, the reader will recognize the Sermon on the Mount, especially its First Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens," as sweet Gospel, something which Luther also saw. In that Beatitude the believer sees himself not simply as an isolated individual struggling between God and Satan or even as a member of the community of the poor who make no claims for themselves from others or God, but he will see himself as one with the speaker of the Sermon

on the Mount whose impoverishment was expressed throughout his life[10] and particularly in death by crucifixion. That gruesome death provides a fuller meaning of the words "the poor in spirit." The Sermon on the Mount introduces themes that Matthew develops throughout his Gospel, in turn providing the context in which the Sermon is to be fully understood.

Apart from the question of the Sermon's message as Gospel, Matthew has arranged his gospel so that the phrase, "preaching the gospel of the kingdom," introduces the Sermon on the Mount and so describes it (4:23–25). This introduction includes the itinerary of Jesus' ministry in "Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan," suggesting that while Jesus addressed the crowds in one particular sermon, which later became known as the Sermon on the Mount, the materials in this first discourse, as his other discourses, were preached wherever he went. What Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount was in no way limited to one place or the first year of his ministry. Matthew frames the ministry of Jesus within his birth and the resurrection, but he gives no hint to its length in terms of months or years. Because of its introduction and content, the Sermon on the Mount could just as well be titled "The Preaching of the Gospel" or simply "The Gospel." About four hundred years after this first discourse was delivered and written down did it become known only as "The Sermon on the Mount." Based on Matthew's own words and its content "The Gospel" would be an even more appropriate title.

Unlike Mark,[11] Matthew does not call what he wrote a "Gospel." Later "Gospel" was applied to Matthew, Luke and John. Matthew seems to have begun his task of writing a catechesis of the teachings of Jesus to provide a conclusion to the Old Testament[12] and not to initiate a "New Testament," which was Luke's contribution. He nevertheless clearly understood that the words of Jesus he recorded, which included the Sermon on the Mount, were qualitatively superior to the words of the Old Testament prophets (13:17). Not only was Jesus the content of their prophecies, but he was God. As Matthew approached the conclusion of his document, he appears to have thought of it as a gospel, as the term was later applied to a book about Jesus, and so he anticipated Mark's attachment of this word to his document.[13] In speaking of the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world (24:14), Matthew is thinking of how evangelization would take place through what he wrote. A public reading of his document, as this would have taken place in the weekly celebration of the Eucharist, was preaching

the Gospel, not only as a proclamation of the good news of salvation but also as an officially sanctioned book. Matthew's sense of the importance of his own gospel was taken over by the post-apostolic church which recognized it as *the* gospel whose most influential section was the Sermon on the Mount. The Evangelist's awareness that his document was really Gospel is evident in the anointing of Jesus: "Truly, I say to you, wherever *this gospel* is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (26:13). He is not thinking of an oral report of the woman's actions but of his document which will be read not in one place but throughout the world.[14]

The Sermon on the Mount: The Church's First Statement of the Gospel looks backward to my *James the Apostle of Faith*, whose goal and purpose were also suggested in the subtitle, *A Primary Christological Epistle for the Persecuted Church*. Like the Sermon on the Mount, the Epistle of James should not be understood as Law, especially as a disjointed collection of wisdom sayings of varying value, as Luther held, but a letter of encouragement to those earliest persecuted Christians who may have erroneously assumed that their allegiance to the resurrected Jesus made them immune to suffering. James seems to have constructed his epistle as a mosaic of those materials which were later organized into the Sermon on the Mount. Had Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount been available, James would have felt himself compelled to follow its words and form more closely, at least in the sense that the fathers of the second and third centuries did. The Seventh and Eighth Beatitudes, with their promises to those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness and Jesus (5:10–11), may well have included the smaller audience that James addressed.

Both James and the entire Gospel of Matthew, especially the Sermon on the Mount, seem at odds with Paul's doctrine of justification. Some scholars see James and Matthew as protests to Paul's teaching of justification by grace through faith without works. This raises the question if anyone recognized these opposing soteriologies with their glaring contradictions when these writings were formally canonized. Opposing soteriologies in the sixteenth century led to splitting the church with Rome using the Sermon on the Mount to its advantage and Lutherans using Paul's writings to theirs. It would be presumptuous for anyone to resolve this division, but the subtitle, *The Church's First Statement of the Gospel*, is an attempt to move the Sermon on the Mount on to the side of the Gospel and partially to address soteriology.

"First" in the subtitle *The Church's First Statement of the Gospel* needs explanation. The Sermon's pre-eminent place in Matthew and the New Testament canon gives it the honor as the first statement of the Gospel. It is the first of five discourses in which the earlier ones anticipate later ones and later ones build on the earlier ones. These discourses were the catechesis or what Matthew calls the *didache* through which candidates were led to Baptism in which God was fully revealed as Father-Son-Holy Spirit (28:19) and then to participate in Jesus' atoning death through his Supper (26:19). In the Sermon on the Mount the candidate first heard the Gospel, first learned about God and how the community of the followers of Jesus was ordered. In several senses Matthew was not the first. He is not responsible for the process of catechesis through which catechumens were prepared for Baptism. Peter as first among the apostles (10:1–2) fittingly was also the first catechist (Acts 2:14–43). Matthew, the preserver and conservator of the words of Jesus, is still editorially responsible for the internal arrangement of the Sermon on the Mount and its place within his gospel, especially how it is related to the other four discourses. He does not exercise his editorial skill arbitrarily, as is evident in that he preserved the more difficult sayings of Jesus which another editor with a keen eye to his readers' sensibilities would have reframed or simply excluded, as Luke arguably does. Matthew is his teacher's trusted scribe (13:52) and lets the difficult sayings stand. In regard to its content, Matthew also is not the first. Before anything was written, the church lived from the oral words Jesus entrusted to his disciples (28:16–20). Through the Spirit's intervention they were preserved and only later were they encased in scrolls and codices by the apostles and their assistants (10:20). Warnings against false prophets (7:15; 24:11, 24) presupposes that alongside of the tradition of the apostles, unofficial traditions flourished. In them the teachings of Jesus and the events connected with his life were bowdlerized by the church's adversaries and those who were indifferent.[15] Matthew's concern with an explanation other than the resurrection for the empty tomb suggests that he was aware that his readers may have been aware of this false tradition which he intended to address in his gospel.

At the start, we said that commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount inevitably confirm the theological agenda of their writers. Hence conclusions are predictable and tell us as much about the writers as they do about the Sermon. This writer anticipates this judgment. As a Lutheran, he can be expected to find the Gospel as the Bible's ultimate purpose; however, in this book he breaks with his tradition in finding the Gospel and not the

Law as the chief content and purpose of the Sermon on the Mount. *The Sermon on the Mount: The Church's First Statement of the Gospel* is hopefully only a beginning in anticipating other volumes on Matthew and the New Testament as catechesis. The Sermon on the Mount has the distinction of being the first.

NOTES

1 John A. T. Robinson, whose contributions in New Testament studies are invaluable, cannot identify the Word with God, *The Priority of John* (ed. J. F. Coakley; London: SCM Press, 1985), 393–97.

2 For the record, a cursory survey of contemporary commentators comes to conclusions on the Lord's Supper which are closer to Calvin than Luther, which means that this controversy is not finished.

3 For example the debate over whether *morphe* in Philippians 2:5 refers to the human nature of Jesus, as the Lutherans contended, or his divine essence, as the Reformed held, is the subject of intensely scholarly essays collected in *Where Christology Began* (ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998).

4 So, for example, Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, The Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 81–83; 153.

5 Charles R. Swindoll, *Simple Faith* (Minneapolis: Grason, 1991). As the title indicates, this explanation of the Sermon on the Mount sees that its meaning is easily accessible and able to be fulfilled.

6 See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1994), 488. This document has a helpful interpretation of the Beatitudes as descriptions of Christ, but something is lost in its holding that the Virgin Mary and the saints have procured these blessings in ways believers in general have not. They are also placed along the Ten Commandments as ways to heaven, which can only be judged to be an unfortunate mixture of the Gospel with the Law (426–49). See also William Barclay, *The Old Law and the New Law: The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1991).

7 The title of an article by Mogens Muller, "The Theological Interpretation of the Figure of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: Some Principal Features in Matthean Christology," *New Testament Studies* 45 (1999): 157–73, is self-explanatory. In his final section, "Christology as Theology," he writes: "For if 'theology' is defined as a clarification of what we mean when speak of God, then Matthew is theology. What takes place in this gospel is that all that is said about Jesus is in fact said about God and his will to save sinners" (172).

8 One can hardly improve on this statement from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "The Beatitudes depict the countenance of Jesus Christ and portray his charity" (427).

9 See for example John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991). This book demonstrates that Jesus was both a teacher of wisdom and a political revolutionary. A list of the alleged authentic teachings of Jesus are found on pages xiii–xvi. See also Ehrman, *Jesus, The Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*.

10 Matthew 8:20: "And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.'"

11 "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1:1). C. E. B. Cranfield lists this as a reference to this Gospel's title as one of ten possibilities; *The Gospel According to Mark*, *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1959; reprint and revised ed., 1972; reprint ed. 1974), 34. Martin Hengel goes further than Cranfield and states "Gospel" is part of the title in *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 72–74. John Wenham follows Hengel and explains how the term "Gospel" was attached to the four documents which are identified in this way; see *Redating Matthew*, *Mark & Luke* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 133–35. Along with Hengel in supporting the view that Mark identified what he had written as a Gospel, Wenham lists J. A. T. Robinson, W. Marxsen, and M. D. Goulder (235).

12 So Mogens Muller remarks that Matthew's genealogy is a "rewritten Bible" (165).

13 Hengel suggests that this happened by 100 A.D., if not before (76).

14 Challenging the generally accepted view that the gospels were intended only for specific audiences is Richard Bauckham, who offers the thesis that the evangelists expected that their gospels would be widely circulated. "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?", *The Gospel for All Christians* (ed. Richard Bauckham; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9–48.

15 Though disciples are designated as the guarantors of Jesus' teaching and are given the prominent place in hearing his discourses, the crowds are in hearing range and listen intently, even when they do not fully understand. Matthew uses the words 'crowd' or 'crowds' approximately forty times and often in connection with the discourses, including the Sermon on the Mount (4:25; 5:1; 7:28). A significant part of the total population of Galilee heard him preach. Consider that five thousand who are miraculously fed first listened to his preaching. An early date for Matthew, perhaps around 40 A.D., would allow for some of its recipients to be among those who heard Jesus preach and witnessed his miracles (4:24–25), but did not fully accept him (12:23). Their knowledge of Jesus would have formed a tradition independent of the oral teachings authorized by the church leaders in Jerusalem. These people would have been chiefly Jews who after the resurrection over a longer period of time became more and more convinced of the claims Jesus had made for himself and which the church was now making for him and wanted to be included in the church. If an official 'tradition' of Jesus was put in place by the apostles, an unofficial 'tradition' existed among the people who had heard Jesus directly or indirectly from those who did. They would have been aware of the different twist Jewish authorities were giving to the church's teaching, as it is evident in conflicting explanations of the empty tomb (28:11–15). Working with a later date would still allow that this kind of tradition still was in place, even if none of the crowds who had seen and heard Jesus were still alive.

Introduction

1

The Church's First Statement of the Gospel

The Place of Honor

Putting Matthew's gospel in the first and honored place in the New Testament was an outgrowth of two processes. First, the gospel that begins with a genealogy serves as a connecting link between the testaments. The second process, involving many persons over many years, was the church's organizing of the canon. The end result being Matthew's gospel was placed first in the New Testament. The Sermon on the Mount, as an introduction to Jesus' teaching and the Gospel as a whole, occupies a prominent position.[1]

Apart from questions of authorship and origin, the Sermon on the Mount, as the first discourse of Jesus, was given the honor of introducing the reader to the entire New Testament in general and to the person of Jesus in particular. It was a matter of first impressions.[2] The effect was that the Sermon had to serve not only as an introduction to Christianity, but at the same time had to reach back and reaffirm the Hebrew Bible as authoritative for the church. Jesus' words "I say to you" (5:18) were balanced with "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets" (5:17). The Sermon not only became the introduction to New Testament Christianity, but the connecting link between the Old and New Testaments. It was given the pivotal position in the canonical Scriptures.

This crucial role within the canon was evidenced in the early post-apostolic church: the Sermon on the Mount is the most frequently cited portion of the New Testament.[3] Thus from the beginning of the church, the task of offering an explanation of the faith went most often to the Sermon on the Mount. Here were found the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer. Was its prominent place in the canon responsible for its great influence? Or was it the reverse? Did the force and beauty of its message not only account for its influence in the early church but also contribute to its being given the place of honor in the canon? Both positions have their implications.

Most scholars see the gospel of Matthew as dependent on Mark and the "Q," the abbreviation for the German word *Quelle* (source), and a special document called "M," available to Matthew and not the other evangelists. A small but persistent group of scholars sees Matthew as the first gospel and Mark as a compilation of material common to Matthew and Luke. This study of Matthew's Sermon does not depend on defending one view over another. It does, however, look at parallel materials in defining meaning in Matthew's gospel. Little of Matthew's Sermon is found in Mark, which has no lengthy sermon. Many of Luke's parallels to Matthew's text are found outside of Luke's Sermon on the Plain. The *Didache*, a catechetical document regarded as Scripture by some in the early church, contains remarkable parallels to the Sermon. Until recent times it was considered dependent on Matthew, but some scholars date it anywhere from the middle to the end of the first century. Even those favoring an earlier date for the *Didache* hold that both Matthew and the *Didache* are dependent on the same sources.[4]

Regardless of when Matthew and the *Didache* are dated, it can be assumed that the material incorporated in the Sermon was known to the church in the 50s. The Epistle of James provides a point of comparison, since so much of its material reverberates with the sounds and echoes the themes of Matthew's Sermon. Though much of the substance found in the Sermon can be found in other documents already by the end of the first century,[5] Matthew's version assumed a place of influence in the church that it would never relinquish.

If the Sermon's influence came from its being placed in the most prominent position in the canon, then it could be assumed that the general shape of our canon with Matthew as the first gospel happened at a very early stage, perhaps even before the end of the first century. Another possibility accounting for the Sermon's great influence is both its message and its style. It has a literary attractiveness all its own. When going to other parts of the New Testament or even other parts of Matthew after reading the Sermon on the Mount, one knows, almost instinctively, that he has come down from a plateau. Luke's version is pale by comparison and the *Didache* approximates the words of the Sermon but not its grandeur. Though the Epistle of James may be earlier, it seems to be an adjustment and application of an earlier message. Matthew's version of the Sermon proved itself to be the most enduring.

Perhaps there is no *one* explanation for the Sermon's popularity, but several factors complement each other. The forcefulness of its message was

2

The Speaker of the Sermon

Matthew 5:1–2

Matthew places the Sermon on the Mount as the first extended discourse of Jesus to confront the reader. It follows shortly after the division describing the public ministry of Jesus which begins at 4:17, "From that time, Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,'" more literally, "Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has come near."[1]

Though it is common to assume that the different lifestyles of John who fasted and Jesus who was accused of being a glutton and drunkard (Matthew 11:19–20) meant that each preached different messages, it cannot be supported from Matthew. The evangelist also says of John that he preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2). This phrase is intended more as summary of their common message rather than a phrase they constantly repeated. The phrase refers to Jesus' entire message as Matthew presents it in his gospel, especially the Sermon. The message of John is abbreviated in 3:7–12. Though it is impossible to reconstruct the totality of John's message from what is contained in Matthew, it may be assumed that it was not that much different from that of Jesus. Where they differ is authority: John's authority is derived like that of the prophets; Jesus' authority is inherited and belongs to his person (7:29). John's reference to the gathering of the wheat and the burning of the chaff (3:12) is similar to the parables of wheat and the weeds (13:24–30). From this one example, it seems that John may also have used agricultural parables. Matthew's purpose in his gospel is to preserve the teaching of Jesus and not of John for the church, as John points to the coming kingdom and Jesus points to himself as the coming of this kingdom. John belongs to Matthew's introduction of Jesus (1:1–4:16), whose teaching is presented first in the Sermon on the Mount. Considering that Luke places John's birth six months before Jesus (1:6) and that John was so effective as to have followers found in Ephesus years after his death (Acts 19:1–4), it appears that the ministries of John and Jesus were coterminous for an extended period. Since John earns the attention of Herod the Tetrarch and is imprisoned (Matthew 14:1–2), it seems unlikely that his ministry could

have lasted only one year. Regardless of how long John worked, Matthew removes him from the scene (4:12) before he presents the teachings of Jesus. Though their ministries overlap, the older age does not survive into the newer one.[2]

THE USE OF THE PENTATEUCH IN PRESENTING JESUS

Many commentators have suggested that the five discourses in the gospel of Matthew, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount, are patterned after the fivefold arrangement of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). In such a recapitulation many have also seen a parallel between Jesus and Moses.[3] This does not mean that a one-for-one equation has to exist between the Old Testament events and Matthew's account of Jesus, since for the faithful Israelite each prophet or specially chosen person recapitulates previous historical persons and projects that image into the future. To use the language of W. D. Davies, there is in Jesus a new exodus and a new Moses; the Mosaic categories are transcended.[4] Each historical person in himself and as part of a larger corporate image contributes to the picture of God's final Messiah. In contrast to the Old Testament, where a series of heroes are presented, each of the gospels, including Matthew, concentrates only on one person: Jesus. Though the lives of others are presented before Moses, e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph in Genesis, Exodus through Deuteronomy is the story of Moses, the man of God. Among these models it is not unexpected that the evangelist should pattern his picture of Jesus after the Exodus-Deuteronomy story of Moses.[5] From the persecutions in his infancy to his final commissioning of the Eleven, there are parallels between Moses and Jesus, through whom God is now speaking his final word, a word far superior to the Old Testament revelation (John 1:17). The image of Moses, of course, is not the only one used by Matthew, since obviously he sees the persons of Abraham, Isaac, David, Solomon, Jonah, perhaps even Elijah and others, represented in Jesus.

Matthew 1:1 is taken by the RSV as a title of the genealogy: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." It has also been understood by scholars as the title of the entire book or the first section. It might be better to render this title as, "The Book of Genesis: The Account of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham." The evangelist has deliberately taken the common designation for the first book of Moses in the Septuagint and used it to begin his account about Jesus Christ.[6] This understanding is reinforced by v. 17, where Matthew recounts that between Abraham and Jesus there are three sets of 14 generations, reminiscent of Genesis 1 and 2, where the creation

Part 1

The Sermon and Its Message

Matthew 5:3–48

3

The Beatitudes—Christology and Ecclesiology

Matthew 5:3–12

In the Lutheran church communion, the Beatitudes serve as a liturgical canticle and are set to music. While this may appear at first glance to be a bit strange, using them as a canticle may reflect the role they played as a hymn about Christ in the early church, not unlike Philippians 2:5–11.[1] The Beatitudes, of course, come from the pre-resurrected Jesus; the Philippians' hymn originated as a post-resurrection church hymn. But each would have been used in the Jerusalem church to present the person of Jesus, and each concentrates on the common New Testament themes of humiliation-exaltation.

It is a common view that the Beatitudes are speaking primarily about Christian lives. In other words, those are the ways the followers of Jesus should act; they are instructions about the behavior of a Christian. According to dogmatic categories, they would fit under ecclesiology and sanctification. But does such a view of the Beatitudes as law or instruction really fit the context? The evangelist has already introduced a high Christology in his presentation of Jesus with the themes Jesus the Revealer (Moses), the Redeemer of Israel, the Christ (the Son of David), and the God of Israel (Emmanuel), all of which he has developed at some length and woven intricately into certain selected events. It would seem strange at this point that he would move abruptly into rules for Christian living. The reader would hardly be prepared for such an abrupt literary tactic at this point. He would, however, expect a further development of the christological theme introduced in 1:1–4:17. As Stanton notes, "The chap[ter]s which precede and follow the SM are profoundly christological."[2]

In his introduction to the person of Jesus, Matthew has summarized the messages of John and Jesus as a preaching of repentance with the announcement that the kingdom of the heavens has come near. From the place of the Sermon and the Beatitudes within the general arrangement of

the gospel, it would not be unexpected to find here the heart of that kingdom preaching. The reader is not disappointed.

The Beatitudes are so closely knit together that it is clear that they were received as a unit by the evangelist and were understood in the church as a unit.[3] They form a unit both in regard to structure and content, with each dependent for its meaning on the others. The nine sentences (Matthew 5:3–11) begin with the word blessed: *markarioi*. Each of these sentences has two parts. After the declaration of blessedness, a reason for this favorable condition with God is given. For example, the poor are blessed because theirs is the kingdom of the heavens.

In Matthew's gospel blessedness refers to the condition or state of an individual who has been favorably accepted by God and has received his divine approval.[4] In Matthew 16:17 Jesus uses the word in its singular form concerning Simon Bar-Jonah, who has recognized that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son. It is used in Jesus' reply to John concerning those who persist in the midst of persecution in believing that in Jesus God's kingdom is appearing (11:6).

It is less than completely satisfactory to understand the condition of blessedness as a reward, since the immediate implication is that those who are considered blessed have done something to deserve or merit God's approval. Even in Matthew 24:46, where it is used of the servant whom his master finds carrying out his responsibilities when he returns, blessedness does not refer to an earned reward. His faithfulness shows that he already belongs to God. His blessedness is seen in the faithfulness with which he carries out the responsibilities his master has given him. A parallel might be found in James 1:25, which seems to reflect the Beatitudes before they assumed written form in Matthew. The one whose life has been permeated by the Gospel, that is, "the perfect … law of liberty," shall be recognized for who he really is—blessed—by what he does.[5] There is no suggestion in the Beatitudes of a cause and effect.[6]

The first eight Beatitudes (5:3–10) are markedly different from the Ninth Beatitude. The first eight speak of "they" (third person plural), while the last one speaks of "you" (second person plural). The ninth Beatitude makes this division even sharper, because not only does it introduce the pronoun "you," but Jesus makes a specifically clear reference to himself: "Blessed are *you* when men revile *you* … on *my* account." At this point we note a subtle shift from Christology to ecclesiology, but in such a way that we can agree with Stanton that "christological and ecclesiological concerns are often inter-related."[7] The high Christology of the intro-

5

Old Testament as Authority Fulfilled in Jesus

Matthew 5:17–20

This section is without parallel in the other two synoptic gospels, except the reference to the impossibility of the passing away of the Old Testament revelation, which is placed by Luke in the context of John the Baptist, who is named as the last of the prophets (16:17). Matthew's pericope should be taken as Jesus' own explanation of his ministry in relationship to the Old Testament. The new understanding of the Old Testament is its *fulfillment* in Jesus; the obligation of the disciples is not to the Old Testament as a separate, independent revelation but to its message now fulfilled or completed in Jesus. The last verse of the pericope, v. 20, refers to the content of the message, now fulfilled in Jesus, as the new righteousness, that is, the righteousness which is superior to that of the scribes and Pharisees.

There is no suggestion that Matthew's church was on the verge of antinomianism, a more characteristic sin among Gentile Christians.[1] His church may have had to address the question of what role the Jewish Scriptures, that is, the Law and the Prophets, had to play in the Jewish Christian synagogues. Alongside the reading of the Old Testament Scriptures, here referred to as the Law and the Prophets, the deeds and words of Jesus were being recited in their services before the gospel was written. This may have given the suggestion to some that the older written revelation of the Old Testament was no longer valid. In fact these early Christian communities might have been aware of the evangelist's writing a new "Bible" (*biblos*; Matthew 1:11) and could have come to the conclusion that the older written revelation had lost its purpose. The reverse may have also been true. The words of Jesus may not have been given the same force as those of the Old Testament. The improper relationship between the testaments found its classicial expression in Marcionism which devalued the older revelation and Ebionism which could not go beyond seeing

Jesus as a prophet. In any event, the evangelist was addressing the issue of the authority of the older written revelation in the church. It was not simply a matter of having 'old' and 'new' testaments and putting the proper value on each, but more importantly seeing the Old Testament coming to a conclusion in Jesus so that the church could have a 'new testament.' The Old Testament would still have validity in the church, but no longer as an autonomous source. The coming of Jesus would not allow for this. It was in the sense of this new understanding that the early church fathers understood this passage against Marcion.

For Matthew the Old Testament has undergone a fundamental change with the coming of Jesus. The problem was not the danger of adding anything to the written revelation, but that of removing part of it; "not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (5:18). The fundamental change brought about in the written revelation is achieved by Jesus who fulfills it. In the Easter narratives Luke twice makes the point that the entire written revelation of the prophets deals with Jesus (24:26, 27, 44). In contrast to Luke, who places the specific fulfillment idea in detail at his gospel's end, Matthew throughout his gospel presents Jesus as the one whose birth, childhood, miracles, preaching, death, and burial fulfill certain Old Testament requirements.[2] There is no summary conclusion of the fulfillment idea in Matthew as Luke has it. Luke in his prologue refers to a document or documents which make references to the events of Jesus' life as fulfillment. Matthew's gospel is exactly this kind of document. More than the other gospels it showed step by step that what Jesus said and did had been predicted by the prophets.

For Matthew, the entire written revelation has undergone a fundamental change with the coming of Jesus; the Law is fulfilled, but in such a way that all of its words and letters stay in place. The fulfilled Law, that is, the Torah now completed in Jesus, has assumed the new form of Matthew's written gospel. For this reason he calls his gospel a *biblos* (5:19). The warning about breaking or relaxing the least of the commandments should be taken not as a reference to the binding nature of the Old Testament's laws, whether they are moral or ritualistic, but as an admonition to take seriously the words of Jesus, which in Matthew's gospel had become fulfilled Scripture. The Greek word for commandments (*entolai*) refers not to a law in the sense of prohibition and threat, but to any divine word, now written, regardless of its content. The Gospel is commandment (*entolē*) because of its origin with God, not in the sense of forbidding or demanding something from the hearer. A disservice is done to the Sermon when the Law-

14

A Brief Treatise on Fasting

Matthew 6:16–18

Fasting was part of ordinary Jewish piety in Jesus' day and was derived from Old Testament rituals attached to such days as the Atonement and New Year's. Not only was fasting associated with national calamities, but individuals also fasted at personal tragedies. David fasts when his first son by Bathsheba is dying (2 Samuel 12:16), and Esther fasts before she confronts her husband, the king (Esther 4:15–16). Both public and private fasting reflected the sense of mortification and helplessness before God.[1]

The sayings on fasting were included by the evangelist not merely to inform the reader of Jesus' disapproval of the ostentatious, visible piety of his contemporaries. The charges of gluttony against Jesus should not be interpreted to mean that he and his disciples exempted themselves from the national fast days of the Jews. Unlike his ostentatious contemporaries, Jesus did not announce to others when he was fasting.[2] Rather than dispense with fasting, the early Christian community retained the practice. Matthew intends to address these words of Jesus to his church, for whom fasting was in vogue. This instruction assumes that people are fasting, and Jesus' words provide guidelines on how it is to be carried out. Davies notes that the Jewish and Christian communities were aware of and influenced by the other's custom of fasting.[3]

At first glance, Matthew 9:14–17 indicates a problem in that Jesus and the disciples, in contrast to the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees, do not fast. Some might be compelled to point out a contradiction that the evangelist permitted to stand. Why include rules on fasting, since Jesus and his followers were not known for practicing it as a display of personal piety? The Sermon's instruction about fasting hardly seems appropriate when compared with the words of Jesus that fasting is inappropriate while the Bridegroom is present (9:15). This pericope, along with 11:18 where John is described as abstaining from food and Jesus as eating and drinking, has been used to show that fasting was appropriate in the religion of the old covenant but has no real place in Christianity. One

commentator remarks that the community of the followers of Jesus is marked not by fasting but by participation in the meal.[4] Negative views on the religious value of fasting are reinforced by Luke's story of the publican and the Pharisee where the latter boasts that he fasts twice in the week and in comparison with the publican remains unjustified (18:12, 14). The question remains as to why the evangelist let the regulation on fasting stand, since neither Mark nor Luke has any regulation on fasting. While it may be concluded that their churches do not know of the custom, it should be pointed out that neither do they know of Matthew's triad of worship involving almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The fasting pericope is not a random logion in Matthew, but it rather belongs to a constellation of important sayings of the Lord.

Though the eucharistic feasting is anticipatory participation in the eschatological banqueting, fasting for Matthew remains appropriate for the followers of Jesus. Fasting played an integral part in early church worship. The selection of Barnabas and Paul at Antioch for the Asian mission was made while the clergy there were worshiping and fasting (Acts 13:2), activities that parallel the praying and fasting of the Matthean liturgical triad. Jesus himself fasted (Matthew 4:2). In response to the question of why the disciples of John fast and Jesus' do not, he answers that they will fast when the bridegroom is taken away from them (Matthew 9:15), most probably a reference to his death. The Old Testament prophets fasted as they waited for deliverance. The church adopts the same posture as it awaits the final parousia. Jesus' strictures against fasting make it no more inherently wrong than praying and giving alms, against which he also directed strictures concerning the manner in which they were done. Both fasting and praying are common religious phenomena and expressions of piety; they were practices for the community of the followers of Jesus as well as for the Pharisees and the disciples of John. The example of the Lucan Pharisee can no more be used as evidence against fasting than it can be used as evidence against praying. The *Didache* requires fasting on the fourth and sixth days, and forbids it on the second and the fifth days as do the "hypocrites" (Pharisees).[5] The *Didache* handles fasting in its discussion of the Lord's Prayer, right after Baptism and just before the Lord's Supper. Fasting in connection with the Lord's Supper has a long church tradition, and the reference in the *Didache* indicates that it was already in place by the end of the first century, if not before. Taking the evidence of the *Didache* it might be argued that the fasting and the worship of the "teachers and elders" in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:2) was in fact a eucharistic service.

Part 4

The Sermon as Teaching Authority in the Church

Matthew 7:13–8:1

Rather than setting forth further directions for the life of the disciple, Matthew 7:13–8:1 sets forth the authority of the message of Jesus for the community and how it will benefit them. It is what is called in the later dogmatic terminology of the church the *prolegomena*, that is, the introduction. Characteristic of *prolegomena* are discussions on the superiority of one theological system over against another, recognition of false alternatives and options, the absolute and true nature of the character of the doctrinal system offered, and the foundation for its claim to authority. The doctrines themselves, those things which are believed and confessed, the *corpus doctrinae*, are not included in the *prolegomena*, but are reserved for the dogmatics proper. The concluding section of the Sermon shows features later characteristic of the *prolegomena*, though it comes at the end. Jesus' words are God's own words and promise eternal life to those who do them.

22

The Two Ways

Matthew 7:13–14

The imagery of two ways to describe different ways of life was used in the Old Testament. Some see its origin in Adam, who in Eden chose a different way. Psalm 1 contrasts the ways of the righteous and the wicked. Taken out of context in the Sermon, the "two ways" could easily be understood as contrasting an ethical and moral life with an immoral one. In Judaism this opinion was held, and it has not been uncommon in the Christian community.[1] This view, however, does not do justice to the Sermon and actually contradicts the Sermon's entire message, which finds the ethical life of the Pharisees unacceptable. The way to life must be interpreted in the light of the demand to seek the higher righteousness by which one becomes forgiving like God.

Whether Jesus has a specific gate in view, perhaps in the city of Jerusalem's wall, is uncertain, but nevertheless this idea is an attractive option.[2] Through the metaphors of the narrow gate and the hard way, though, Jesus is referring to what he has already said about the Kingdom. These sayings, like the final section (7:24–27), call attention to the importance of what Jesus has just preached in the Sermon. The command to seek the narrow way should not be taken as further imperative for the Christian to live the morally perfect life. While it might not be entirely clear in Matthew that this logion of Jesus is directed to the issue of salvation, it is made specific in Luke, where these words are used as a reply to the question, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" (13:23). Jesus' answer is, "Strive to enter by the narrow door" (24). For Luke the gate is a reference to salvation, but he makes no use of Matthew's double metaphor of gate and way and simply has the door.[3]

Within the early church this proved to be one of the more influential parts of the Sermon. The *Didache* begins, "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways" (1:1). If the *Didache* is not dependent on Matthew's version of the Sermon, both are drawing from the same source.[4] The similarity of the Sermon to

the *Didache* suggests that both were catechetical tools; each was a compendium of the teachings of Jesus for the church to which they were written. The way of life, according to the *Didache*, is the teachings of Jesus, preserved essentially in the Sermon.[5] Though the metaphors of both the gate and the way are used in the Sermon, the term "way" and not "gate" became synonymous with the religion of Jesus. The *Didache* prefers "way" for "gate. The use of the term "way" in Acts may show that the sayings from Matthew's Sermon were widely known in the early church, as it provided the word by which the followers of Jesus were called by themselves and their enemies. Paul (Saul) is sent by the authorities in Jerusalem to arrest followers of "the Way" in Damascus (Acts 9:2). If the conversion of Paul is dated c. 31 to 32 and the crucifixion-resurrection of Jesus c. 28 or 30, in a span no longer than a few years the church became known as the way—its first name, even among its enemies. Acts contains speeches of Paul in which he refers to his life before he became a Christian, in which he persecuted *the Way* (22:4; 24:14), thus indicating how widespread the use of this term was even among non-Christians, to whom these sermons were addressed. The term was used in Jerusalem, Damascus, and Corinth (Acts 19:9). It was even understood in the Gentile world as referring to Christians, since Paul used it in his speech before Felix.

Among the logia eventually included in Matthew's version of the Sermon, the one on the gate and the way made a profound impression on the early Christian community; it provided a shorthand description for the teachings of Jesus. The way was the teachings of Jesus, and those who believed them were called followers of the way. John goes one step further: Jesus calls himself the Way (14:6). The Fourth Gospel also identifies Jesus as the Door (10:9), suggesting a possible awareness of Luke 13:24, or at least these evangelists were drawing on a commonly held understanding. This is more of an elaboration than development, since the Sermon directs the attention of the disciples not to abstract teachings as in the Qur'an, but to Jesus himself. Luke, in his parallel, uses "door" and not "way" or "gate." Later, in Acts, he preserves the data that the early community was first called the Way. He may have preferred "door" because its narrowness points to the difficulty of becoming a Christian.

The Sermon (Matthew 7:13–14) and the Lucan parallel (13:24) are the only places where the word "narrow" is used. The word suggests that requirements of the Sermon with its prescribed limitations demand adherence without wavering. The word for "hard" means more literally the way marked by tribulations.[6] Thus the stress of the Christian religion is less on