

The Adventist Community as the Light of the World: *Claiming the Whole of Matthew's Vision* | BY ERNEST J. BURSEY

SERMON ON THE MOUNT, MATT. 5:1, FRANZ GÜLLERY



I live with the notion that texts shape communities, sometimes perversely. Surely sacred texts should shape sacred communities in honorable ways. That is why they were written. What sort of community would emerge from a faithful reading of the Sermon on the Mount, the major address in the Gospel of Matthew? Communities of faith have long looked to the Sermon on the Mount for a sense of identity. The Puritans of New England considered themselves the light on the hill in the wilderness of the New World. The Amish have succeeded in freezing a cultural expression of the Sermon on the Mount.

What if our community of faith, the Seventh-day Adventist community, took more seriously its identity as a community of light and salt, obedient to the vision of Jesus and Matthew? Would it become more perfectionist, or even legalistic, in dire need of the Pauline or even Johannine perspectives on salvation and experiential religion? Would such a focus lead to denominational pride, the downside of possessing the truth? The following article reviews my conclusions and convictions.

I grew up believing that my church had exclusive ownership of Revelation 14:6–12. I memorized its horrific language. But as a ten-year-old in Mrs. Pitts' fifth-grade classroom in Loma Linda, I also memorized the Beatitudes in order to be invested as a Junior Missionary Volunteer Friend. It took all of ten minutes of focused attention to plant the words lightly on my brain so as to repeat them back without error. No one instructed me on the sense or significance of these words. They left before dawn the next day.

Aside from the fleeting Beatitudes, there was the often-quoted collection that followed:

Ye are the light of the world... Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Think not that I have come to abolish

the Law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not a jot or a tittle will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matt. 5:13, 16–18)

Jesus' summons in Matthew 5:48, "Be ye therefore perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect," was repeated in sermons to support the call to sinlessness, especially for those of us living in the end-time, even as its possibilities of achievement were less openly debated. Other verses throughout Matthew about the Sabbath and the Second Coming seemed to support my community's appropriation and reading of the Sermon on the Mount, with its high view of the Law and the importance of keeping all the commandments, including the forgotten Fourth.

The periodic decisions of religion departments and committees to revise curricula can have huge impact not only on the students taking the new courses, but as much or more on the teachers assigned to teach them. Returning to full-time teaching at Walla Walla College from graduate school in 1982, I was handed a new course to teach—the two-quarter-hour course, Sermon on the Mount.

My personal attention to the Sermon on the Mount had lagged for perhaps thirty years after the fifth grade. It is only a modest exaggeration to say that the subsequent twenty-five years of my professional and spiritual life are a postscript to that curriculum decision and course assignment.

In the wisdom of the faculty during my academic absence, the old Life and Teachings of Jesus course had been laid to rest, with three new courses constructed from its remains, one of which was the Sermon on the Mount. The textbook was ostensibly three chapters in Matthew and a few verses in Luke 6. Ellen White's slim *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings* was a presumed supplement.

On the first day of class, I waved a single sheet of paper in front of the students, offered them multiple copies of the textbook, and began the process of public reflection on the exegetical riches and practical value of these few

lines. In time, I managed to put together the substance of twenty class lectures and matching assignments, and I even memorized the textbook.

As I read widely in the vast scholarly and devotional literature on the Sermon, I developed a deep appreciation for the little book abbreviated in class notes as *MB*. If the Sermon on the Mount had become my central turf and Matthew my spiritual guide, Ellen White remained my spiritual mother.

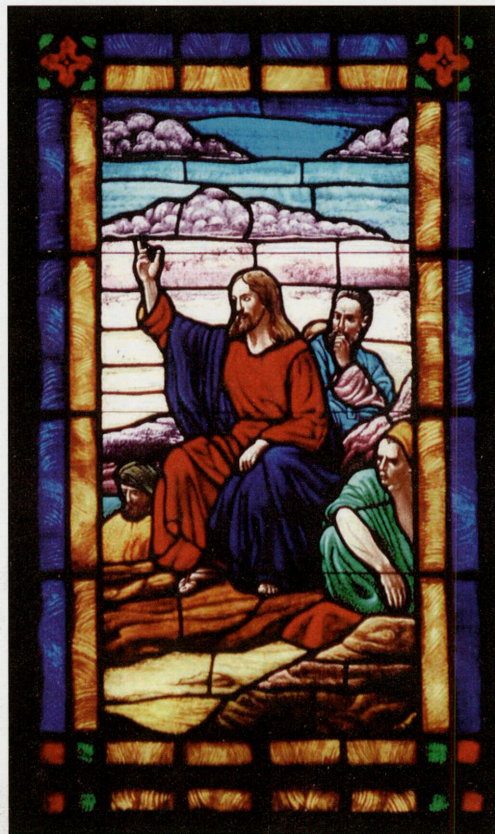
In the meantime, I searched to find an original Ph.D. dissertation topic that could please my committee on the other side of the country and then began a decades' long struggle to complete a dissertation that involved a close reading of Matthew on the subject of exorcism. These close readings for the dissertation convinced me that the book of Matthew had been carefully, even meticulously, constructed from the available materials and led me to discern inner connections and developments I had missed before entering the doctoral program.

In addition, regular opportunities to teach an upper division general studies course on the Gospel of Matthew as well as separate com-

panion courses on the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John allowed me to live as a privileged house guest in each Gospel for up to three months at a time.

Over time, I became convinced that the book of Matthew was intended in its entirety as a manual for missionaries (Matt. 28:18–20). Its construction spoke to the skill of a Master Teacher being well-served by a master writer-teacher who edited Mark's story to allow room for several lectures constructed out of the available sayings.

Roughly speaking, what Mark had done in constructing a powerful narrative, albeit in mosaic form, out of the pieces of the Jesus traditions was matched by Matthew's subsequent feat in constructing a corresponding series of lectures out of the available sayings collections in the Jesus tradition. What the product, the Gospel of Matthew, lacked in narrative color, when compared with Mark or Luke, was replaced



by a high level of order, making it an accessible guidebook for the student or apprentice engaged in church planting.

I began to read the Sermon on the Mount as a speech event designed to be re-enacted again and again. I recited it by memory in its entirety at the beginning of the course, in public sermons, and even at Adventist ministerial seminars, where I recommended it as the source for balanced sermonic fair in confronting the central issues of Adventist engagement with the world alongside the essential spiritual disciplines.

The Beatitudes were now back with a vengeance. I came to see them as a sort of portable three-by-five review card, punctuated with the repetitive sounds of *pi* for easier recall—note the “p” sounds in *ptochoi* to *pneumatic*, v. 3; *penthountes* and *paraklythesontai*, v. 4; *prais*, v. 5; and *peinontes*, v. 6. In short, the Beatitudes stand as a carefully constructed summary of the Christian way designed to be memorized and retained.

The Beatitudes are divided into two equal halves of thirty-six Greek words each. Each half ends with attention to “righteousness” (5:6 and 5:10). To simplify, the first half, the four beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–6, seemed directed primarily to the disciple’s relation with God, culminating in a hunger for righteousness. The second half, the four beatitudes in Matthew 5:7–10, appeared to be directed primarily to the righteous relationship of the disciple with the community and the world.

The overarching “kingdom of heaven,” highlighted in the first and last beatitudes (5:3 and 5:10), holds in its embrace the cluster of rewards in 5:4–5:9. Then Matthew unpacked and illustrated the elements of the Beatitudes in the rest of the Sermon, which itself was echoed and expanded in the remaining lectures in the book, and illustrated by the

actions of Jesus in the narrative. I imagined a widening wedge, starting with the Beatitudes. I was finding the sense in the arrangement of the whole book as well as its parts.

Another Walla Walla College School of Theology curriculum revision committee in the 1990s and the teaching assignment from my encouraging peers pitched me forward into developing a new course on Spiritual Formation for incoming theology and religion majors team taught with Pastor Bill Knott, now of the *Adventist Review*. Utterly out of my league in terms of academic and personal preparation for a course on spirituality, I began to search for help.

I walked into Jon Dybdahl’s office at Andrews University and asked, “Jon, what is unique about Christian spirituality?”

Without hesitation he said, “Repentance.” Of course. That was Jesus’ mantra in Matthew 4:17. His reminder

gave me not only direction in the new course but also fresh impetus in revisiting the older course on the Sermon on the Mount.

Just a few verses before the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7, we see Jesus touring Galilee with the call, “Repent for the kingdom of

heaven is at hand” (4:17; compare 3:2). I began to consider the tie between Jesus’ public call for repentance and the Beatitudes that followed a few verses later in 5:1, 2, where he teaches the disciples and the crowds that followed him.

Given Matthew’s skills in development and Jesus’ evident interest in both repentance and the kingdom, it seemed to me most unlikely that the call to repentance



in light of the coming kingdom remained merely a slogan encountered by the reader near the beginning of the book only to be left at the side of the road for other more important matters. If the Beatitudes were intended to take up the bare threads of Jesus' mantra to "Repent" and his announcement of the kingdom's nearness, then the first beatitude, at least, and others, as well, would need to be understood in the light of that mantra.

In fact, the Beatitudes do take up the "kingdom of heaven" as the central reality encountered as one enters and leaves the Beatitudes (5:3, 5:10). Scholarly debates about how to interpret Matthew's version of the Beatitudes in light of Luke's quite different formulations of both the Beatitudes and the Woes or in light of Jewish understandings of the "poor" have to make room for Matthew's own views revealed by Matthew's intratextual connections.

I was driven by conviction from years of reading Matthew's careful work that he would not leave Jesus' mantra, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," to languish on the side of the road, ignored and underdeveloped.

Instead, the Beatitudes emerged to me as an artful and accessible description of both repentance and the kingdom of heaven. For Matthew, the "poor in spirit" (5:3) described the core of repentance. Surely not everyone who mourns (5:4) is or will be comforted. But surely those who mourn in the state of repentance will be comforted. If repentance is the appropriate response to the presence of the kingdom, it is also the appropriate entrance to the kingdom of heaven.

Repentance for Matthew's Jesus is not a formal act but a profound movement, transforming the whole being. The meekness, the gentleness and accessibility of their Teacher (11:29), who himself has already received all authority in heaven and on earth (28:18–20), is to be met with the meekness, humility, and "teachableness" of the learners (5:5), willing now to set aside their own views about the kingdom and righteousness.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness (5:6), whether understood as holiness or justice or both, that intense desire to be a better person and to seek a better world, is the swelling bud that flowers in the final four beatitudes, where mercy, integrity, assertive peacemaking characterize the disciples' righteousness in a community of salt and light (5:7–10).

It was coming together for me—the pieces were connected: the call to repent, the beatitudes, and on to Matthew's vision of the community of salt and light. The expanding wedge started with that call to repentance. We may apply and expand our understanding of the Beatitudes beyond Matthew's description of repentance in light of the coming kingdom of heaven. We may insist on more. But we must start with that as most likely Matthew's intention.

There were other important pieces that I cannot overlook in this brief recital of an exegetical journey toward spiritual truth. The austere rigor of the Sermon has led many interpreters and lay readers to see it as law instead of gospel. The warnings against anger and against sinning with the eyes, the call to perfection—all these the beginning student finds daunting.

Should the Sermon on the Mount be retained as preparation for the Gospel by setting the standard of righteousness too high for human achievement? Should it be seen as merely provisional, intended for the Jews of Jesus' time, in the interim awaiting the end of the world? Why not admit that its author, a Jewish Christian scribe too closely tied to his perfectionistic past, misunderstood or even betrayed Jesus' message?

Too loyal myself to both Matthew and Jesus to embrace any of these suggestions, I stumbled on the first beatitude. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "Is." Present tense. *Estin*. Not in the future tense, like all the other verbs in the six next verses. Present tense. Why? And why hadn't I noticed the "is" sooner? Why take an "is" for granted?

Somewhere in the countless cycles of repeating the Sermon and the Beatitudes I heard the "is" in this first foundational Beatitude and began reflecting on its implications. All the calls to righteous thought and action in the rest of the Sermon have to be read in light of that "is." If the Beatitudes connect up with Jesus' call to "repent" (4:16), then the first Beatitude is an offer of sheer grace, a present possession of or inclusion in the kingdom of heaven.

Membership in the kingdom of heaven is not based on the achievement of ethical perfection or even the performance of a mature believer but on the response of the humbled spirit to the presence of the kingdom. Those who acknowledge their brokenness in the presence of God are

accounted as part of his kingdom. That kingdom is present, though its full flowering remains a promise—the reason for the future tense verbs used in describing all the other rewards in 5:4–9.

The gap between Paul and Matthew's Jesus diminishes, if not completely disappears. Salvation becomes a present reality for the repentant. We can say we are saved. As I coined it for my students, "You are not on trial but in training."

Matthew presents repentance as the foundation for all spiritual and ethical progress. Repentance becomes normative for the disciple when understood as poverty in spirit and sensitivity to the consequences of our ethical and moral failures, and by an appropriate humility and an intense desire for holiness. From this point of view, it is healthy, normal, and right to repent, to be in the process of repenting.

It is morbid, abnormal, and wrong to live and act otherwise. Repentance is but acknowledging the truth of my spiritual poverty in the presence of the One who knows much more about my spiritual poverty than I imagine. To lightly paraphrase Ellen White, "Every advance in the life of the Spirit is marked by a deepening sense of repentance."

However, to stop here would fall far short of representing Matthew's vision. So far, I have written of the disciple in the singular, as if Jesus had said, "Blessed is the one who is poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to him." Our English translations allow us to imagine that Jesus' words, "You are the light of the world," really mean "This little light of mine."

No, what Jesus had in mind was a community of the

repentant. The Greek word, *humeis*, "you" in "You are the light," is plural, as the old King James Version clarifies, "Ye are the light of the world." Even the call to "Be ye therefore perfect" is addressed to the community as a whole. One does not develop spiritual maturity in isolation. Jesus did not envision a solitary goodness, a singular maturity.¹

The purpose of the good works of an enlightening

community of the repentant is to lead to the praise of our Father, just as the praiseworthy deeds of children bring praise to the parent who brought them to life, and fed and trained them. But what good deeds dare the community pursue?

Matthew provides six illustrations in Matthew 5:21–48. The good works, alluded to in the Beatitudes and acclaimed in the call to let your light shine, are displayed in the six cases that follow—starting with the making of peace within the

family as Jesus' way of keeping the commandment, "You shall not kill." A community not at peace with itself cannot bring peace.

But Jesus goes deeper. We are to abort the evil deed while it is still in the womb of our heart. Vows of faithfulness are to be kept. Truth is to be spoken without props. In the final two illustrations, Jesus pushes us forward to deeds of assertive surprising love in the face of evil. Not only forego vengeance, but also "turn the other cheek" and "walk the second mile," disrupting the routinizations of violence and control.

This is not a call to passivity, not a retreat to quietism, but the assertive love for even the enemy. The



call to perfection or, more accurately, maturity, is issued right after the command to love the enemies and pray for the persecutors.

This article cannot be comprehensive. I must soon stop. But first, here is one more vital insight. Listen to the apparent contradiction between Matthew 5:16, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven," and Matthew 6:1, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

The tension is clearly evident. It can only be resolved by recognizing that the good works to be witnessed by men mentioned in 5:16 are illustrated by the descriptions of the good works of the righteous that follow in Matthew 5:21–48. Peacemaking, faithfulness, integrity, assertive and loving responses to evil—these are to be on display.

However, the mention of the righteousness not to be witnessed by men (6:1) is followed by the descriptions of the religious practices of alms, prayer, and fasting in 6:2–18, and characteristic of the pious in every religion. Within Judaism, these deeds of piety can also be technically described as "righteousness" (compare Phil. 3:6).

I suspect Matthew intentionally edited Jesus' speech to give the hearers a jolt in 6:1 that could only be resolved by listening to the implicit resolution that follows. He intended that they listen carefully to what follows. For us, this means that Jesus acknowledges the spiritual disciplines of a religious community. But in no way are these ever on display.

The community of salt and light may keep the Sabbath but its members are not to be known as "the Sabbath keepers." The community of Jesus' apprentices, as the collective light of the world, exists for the sake of the world. Its good works of mercy, integrity, peacemaking, and assertive love—not its religious exercises, vital as they are for the benefit of the community—are to engage the heart and imagination of the world. Besides, one does not take one's pills in full view of the neighbors.

At the beginning of this article, I asked, "What if our community of faith, the Seventh-day Adventist community, took more seriously its identity as a community of light and salt, obedient to the vision of Jesus and Matthew? What sort of community would emerge from a faithful reading of the major address in that Gospel?" In this article, I have operated with the belief that faithfulness must start with a careful reading of the whole text. I have proposed a number of readings that I believe would enrich the traditional Adventist reading of the Sermon, to snatch a few verses here and there in support of distinctive Adventist beliefs.

What benefits might then accrue from our taking up Matthew's comprehensive vision of a community of Jesus' apprentices? In response, I must lay aside any imagined exegetical authority I possess and simply offer suggestions as a fellow believer.

Denominational attention would be directed to the weightier matters of the law like justice, mercy, and faithfulness (23:23). Local congregations would provide honest mutual support in the journey to maturity (18:1–34). The church would be a safe place to grow. And a renewed appreciation might arise for the mature moral vision of Ellen White (or, if you prefer, the moral vision of the mature Ellen White).

In summary, this would be a church with a balanced and realistic view of the normal spiritual life with the assurance of a present salvation for the repentant. It would be a church with humility in place of religious arrogance; a church with a sense of identity and mission beyond pointing out who and what is dangerous out there; and a church with members who are actively and creatively loving their evil world instead of isolating themselves from it. ■

Notes and References

1. The switch between the singular and plural pronouns in the pronouncements throughout the Sermon on the Mount allows for some debate—is the brief Lord's Prayer intended for public or private use, since it follows the command in the singular to go into one's closet to pray? Surely, if uttered by a solitary person the prayer's sentiments could only be claimed if that solitary pray-er was aware of a larger "our" and "us" for whom she was praying.

Ernest J. Bursey teaches religion at the Florida Hospital College of Health Sciences, in Orlando, Florida.