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The Christian Counter-Revolution

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Called out from the world as a “peculiar people” and charged to be salt and light in a dark and rebellious world, the church has perpetually struggled with the command to be “in the world but not of it.” Sadly, the world has often appeared to influence the church more than the church has influenced the world. Furthermore, the secular transformation of the society appears to have created a great chasm between the church and the world. How can Christians hope to transform a culture?

The reality of our calling and the revolutionary character of the Christian faith are nowhere more evident than in the Sermon on the Mount. Addressing his disciples, Jesus spoke with directness and candor and established the rule of the Kingdom of God in the midst of a rebellious and ungodly culture. This is a message directly addressed to the church, not to the world. The principles of the Sermon on the Mount are counter-intuitive, and make sense only when an affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ stands at the foundation.

Christians have struggled with the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount ever since those first disciples heard their Lord present these teachings on that pastoral hillside. The struggle basically comes down to this: Is there any way to escape the plain meaning of the sermon? Do those who lust in their hearts really commit adultery? Are we really to pluck out offending eyes and cut off sinful hands? Must we always turn the other cheek and walk the extra mile, love our enemies and bless those who curse us?

Jesus’ words cut like a surgeon’s scalpel into the soft underbelly of Christian discipleship. We have the live like this?

In all honesty, the church cannot relegate the Sermon on the Mount to some later age, limit its application to the first disciples, or evade its teachings by allegory and anxious explanation. Like frantic litigators looking for loopholes in a contract, some Christians have attempted to find a way to lessen the impact of the Sermon and establish a more comfortable mode of discipleship—“Christianity Lite.”

But twist as we may, there is no escaping the Sermon on the Mount, for we have but one Lord, and the Sermon is His manifesto for the church—His bride and body.

The Sermon must be taken as a whole, and its several sections must not be ripped from their context. Jesus begins with blessings—the Beatitudes—moves into moral imperatives, and then teaches us the Lord’s Prayer and aspects of discipleship in the church.

Jesus was not imparting a new legalism. Salvation is all of grace, and the Sermon on the Mount is not a catalogue of moral qualities to make one worthy of salvation. Jesus did not replace the legalism of the Pharisees with yet another. Rather, Jesus was establishing the rule of the Kingdom of God and making plain the transforming moral vision to be held

by citizens of that realm of the redeemed.

He was not painting a vivid picture of a distant reality, however. Though the Kingdom is not yet here in fullness, it is here in part and in truth through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Our fulfillment of the moral imperatives and lifestyle of the Sermon is, like salvation itself, a matter of grace, and not of human faithfulness. Yet we are called all the same, and given our marching orders. As R. T. France comments: “The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is not to be admired but obeyed.”

The secular world sees the Sermon on the Mount as an ethereal vision of a utopian morality. Jesus is admired as a great moral teacher, but his precepts are taken as lofty goals for moral contemplation. The Sermon on the Mount is granted a token respect, but the secular world is not about to change its basic rules and commitments. Too much is at stake, after all.

On the other hand, the Church is God’s Christian counter-culture. The Sermon on the Mount is thus Christ’s call to a Christian counter-revolution. No force on earth can match the influence of Christian disciples bearing witness to salvation in Jesus Christ and exhibiting lifestyles which befit citizens of the Kingdom.

This is how Christians wage a culture war. Not with armaments and artillery, not with the sword but with the Spirit—not with worldly power but with the Gospel. Important battles must be fought in the courts, in the schools, and in the marketplace of ideas. But the Church must fight its battles with character and not with cowardice, and with truth rather than technique. God’s moral counter-revolutionaries bear the mark of the crucified and resurrected Christ and order their lives by the precepts of the eternal Kingdom. Christians cannot avoid political engagement, but the concern of the Church is never merely political.

The principles revealed in the Sermon on the Mount cannot be reduced to pithy precepts. Christians rightly struggle with how these teachings of the Savior are to be applied in our times. The church must give itself anew in every generation to the task of mature Christian reflection on the Sermon on the Mount and the totality of the biblical revelation. The Sermon on the Mount, like all biblical texts, must be interpreted in light of the total context of Scripture. This Sermon demands a lifetime of study and struggle.

One important factor in the Sermon on the Mount is Christ’s amplification and internalization of the Law. In the famous but I say unto you passages, Jesus not only sustains the Law’s intention, He amplifies it. Avoidance of adultery is not enough—the Christian must avoid lust. Failure to murder is not enough—the Christian must not hate.

Never has the world stood in such need of the Christian counter-revolution. Living out the Sermon on the Mount, the church must show the world how to live a different way—a way for which the only explanation is the unconditional lordship of Jesus Christ. Standing in the narrow passage between the old year and the new, this is a good time to remember how a Christian counter-revolution would really look.

