

The Sermon on the Mount and Verbal Inspiration

A Study of Matthew 5:17-48

It has long been the contention of Modernist theology that the teaching of Jesus Christ can be separated from His Person. Although there is an unwillingness to accept the claims of Christ that all men should honor Him even as they honor the Father (John 5:23), there is a professed willingness to accept the ethic of Jesus. Indeed the theology of Modernism is largely restricted to an emphasis upon social righteousness based, it is said, on such wonderful teachings as the golden rule found in the Sermon on the Mount.

It is of special interest, therefore to analyze the Sermon on the Mount and see if indeed it teaches the doctrines that Modernists emphasize so greatly. Our present purpose is to consider only one aspect of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon -- His view of inspiration.

Christ's View of the Old Testament

Christ's words concerning the Book come very early. In Matt. 5:17 He says: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets." This and the following verse have a close parallel in another connection in Luke 16:16,17. There are some who would hold that sayings found in both Matthew and Luke were originally in Q the common source allegedly used by these two gospels and are therefore especially well attested sayings of Christ. The passage thus gains in importance because even critical scholars tend to regard it as authentic.

The reference is clearly to a Book, a well defined canon of Scripture. The expression "Law or the Prophets" in Matthew is quite equal to the terms "law and the prophets" in Luke. The expression is so well known as hardly to warrant comment. It is used with slight variations some eight times in the Gospels and twice elsewhere in the New Testament. When Christianity began there was a canon of Scripture, a Book to which it had access and to which it constantly appealed. Christianity was a Book religion from the start. And Christ in our verse recommended that Book to us.

Now in verse 18, Christ says the book is perfect in its smallest detail for "law" clearly refers to the whole scriptures just previously mentioned; there is no thought of contrast between two parts of the canon. Doubtless Christ was speaking in Aramaic and the Greek "iota" is a reflection of the name of the Hebrew and Aramaic letter yodh which is the smallest letter in the alphabet then used by the Jews. The meaning of the "keraia", "tittle" or "horn" is less certain. It is usually taken to be a small projection distinguishing one letter from another like the dot over our English "i" or the crossing of the "t". Some have argued that it is an expression reflecting the Aramaic letter Waw, another insignificant letter in their alphabet. For our purposes it does not matter. Christ is simply heaping up words to show that the Scriptures are perfect to the minutest detail. Their smallest letters are of the greatest importance. They are more enduring than the heaven and earth.