THE NEW TESTAMENT AROUND THE WORLD

Exploring Key Texts from Different Contexts

EDITED BY

MARIAM KAMELL KOVALISHYN

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CONTENTS

Part 1

GOSPELS AND ACTS

1

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats as a Summons to Total Discipleship

Matthew 25:31–46 in Conversation with Integral Orthodoxy

BERNARDO CHO

At the conclusion of a long series of speeches preceding Jesus's last moments in Jerusalem, Matthew presents us with an unparalleled passage, traditionally known as the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46).[1] It begins with Jesus alluding to the vision of Daniel 7 so as to speak of "the Son of Man" who will sit "on his glorious throne" (Matt. 25:31) and finally judge "all the nations" (v. 32).[2] The parable then proceeds to describe how said judgment will take place. Just as a shepherd sets apart "the sheep from

1. On the genre of the passage, see John R. Donahue, "The 'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics," *TS* 47 (1986): 9–11. On the closing of Matt. 24–25, see W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19–28: Volume 3*, ICC (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 418; Dan O. Via, "Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31–45," *HTR* 80 (1987): 84.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of ancient texts, biblical passages, and modern sources in Portuguese are my own.

the goats," the end-time royal judge will distinguish the nations "from one another" (v. 32), with the result that "the righteous ones" will enter "eternal life" (v. 46), whereas the "accursed ones" will be sent to "eternal punishment" (vv. 41, 46). Most importantly, this climactic discourse reveals that the people inheriting the everlasting kingdom will be represented by those showing acts of compassion to "one of these least of my brothers" (v. 40), with whom the exalted Jesus closely identifies. The passage thus articulates the basis on which the eschatological destiny of the nations stands or falls: to feed, to welcome, to clothe, to nurse, and to visit the Son of Man's "brothers and sisters" (*adelphoi*) is to belong to him and his people, but to fail to do so is to exclude oneself from the protection of the apocalyptic shepherd-king.

Matthew 25:31–46 and Recent Debates in Brazilian Missiology

Despite its grammatical simplicity, the central point of the passage has rendered its theological appropriation rather elusive, especially for readers accustomed to setting the Pauline theme of justification by faith against Christian ethics (cf. Rom. 1–4; Gal. 1–3). If those suffering social dislocation are considered members of Jesus's own family, and works of justice are intrinsic to the identity of "the righteous ones," is the parable not blatantly teaching some degree of human merit as a means to salvation—whether by serving the outcast or by simply being in need? The fact that most technical discussions have focused on the referents of "these least of my brothers" and "the sheep" is surely indicative of how much is at stake.[3] Given that both groups are presumably counted among the saved, it seems crucial to determine precisely who they are in order for us to understand exactly how—or if—belief and practice are supposed to go together.[4]

Indeed, liberation theologians have famously tried to make sense of the implications of Matthew 25:31–46, resorting to it in defense of centering the principal thrust of Christianity not on its distinctive set of tenets but rather on its praxis of social justice.[5] Particularly in Brazil, reflections prioritizing socio-analytic categories, though not always overtly citing this parable, have given rise to the notion that the very presence of Jesus rests in the lives of the

3. See Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 551–61, and the further references cited therein.

4. J. Ramsey Michaels, "Apostolic Hardship and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Matthew 25:31–46," *JBL* 84 (1965): 27.

5. The most classic example is Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 191. See discussion in Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 267–70.

economically destitute, apart from any public confession of Christ's lordship.[6] Accordingly, it has become increasingly common to find, both in the literature and in popular understanding across the country, the downplaying of the doctrinal aspect of Christian proclamation, as if knowing the biblical gospel was of secondary relevance so long as one is busy alleviating the suffering of the oppressed.[7]

Influenced by the Lausanne movement and echoing the ideas advanced chiefly by Ecuadorian scholar René Padilla, many evangelical leaders in Brazil have countered by advocating a missiological approach, called "integral mission" (*missão integral*), which encompasses, among other things, both evangelism and social action.[8] Simply put, it proposes, on the one hand, that the announcing of the good news of Jesus must include a genuine preoccupation with social justice—a principle demonstrably neglected by many Christian communities, not least the so-called prosperity churches—and, on the other hand, that concern for the poor must not entail the diminishing of the normative content of the gospel.[9] In contrast to the jettisoning of proper proclamation by some liberation theologians, and also departing from a long-held assumption that good works are simply instrumental to preaching, integral mission has thus underscored the centrality of both conversionism *and* public engagements in eliminating economic injustice.[10] The following statement by the late Anglican bishop Robinson Cavalcanti, commenting on the 1974 Lausanne Covenant, represents a core concern by those holding this view: "As one notices, neither the reality of sin nor the need for conversion is in doubt, but rather the content of the converts' mission in this world, the extent of the implications of sin beyond the merely individual, as well as the scope and the means of the prophetic denunciation of [social injustice] by the Church."[11]

6. See Hugo Assmann and Jung Mo Sung, *Deus em Nós: O Reinado que Acontece no Amor Solidário aos Pobres* (São Paulo: Paulus, 2014).

7. E.g., José Comblin, *O Espírito Santo e a Libertação* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1988), 31.

8. See C. René Padilla, *Mission between the Times: Essays of the Kingdom* (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2013); Samuel Escobar, *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity* (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2003). See also David C. Kirkpatrick, "C. René Padilla and the Origins of Integral Mission in Post-War Latin America," *JEH* 67 (2016): 351–71.

9. Recent treatments are Paulo Cappelletti, *Encontro das Teologias Latino-Americanas: Análise Histórico-Teológica da Teologia da Missão Integral versus Teologia da Libertação* (Londrina: Descoberta, 2019); Regina Sanches, *Teologia da Missão Integral: História e Método da Teologia Evangélica Latino-Americana* (São Paulo: Reflexão, 2009).

10. See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 40; David Bebbington, "Evangelicals and Reform: An Analysis of Social and Political Action," *Third Way* 6 (1983): 10–13. Both are cited in Kirkpatrick, "C. René Padilla," 353.

11. Robinson Cavalcanti, *A Utopia Possível: Em Busca de um Cristianismo Integral* (Viçosa: Ultimato, 1997), 27.

The reception of this holistic approach, however, has been far from homogenous and has prompted critical responses from more conservative circles in subsequent years.[12] These debates have taken on a life of their own, making it impossible to parse the nuances here. Political preferences on both extremes of the spectrum have often set the tone for the conversation, leaving attempts at finding common theological ground unfruitful. What is more pressing for our purposes is that, while some proponents of integral mission have insisted that evangelism and social action are equivalent to two inseparable wings of a plane,[13] others have been accused of understating the place of orthodox thinking, thereby subsuming the message of the cross under a Marxist worldview, resembling their counterparts within liberation theology.[14] As a way forward, Pedro Dulci has recently argued for a methodological fine-tuning based on historic conceptions of the relation between nature and grace, in hopes of clarifying precisely how the two wings of Christian mission are to fly.[15] This revision has been termed "integral orthodoxy" (*ortodoxia integral*).[16]

As it shall become clear in what follows, in discussing the theological thrust of Matthew 25:31–46, one is struck by the same questions that have animated current missiological discussions within Brazilian evangelicalism. By bringing the idea of integral orthodoxy to bear in our interpretation of the passage,[17] I will argue that "these least of my brothers" and "the sheep" serve as paragons of total discipleship, entailing suffering and social action as visible expressions of faith in the teachings of Jesus. To that end, I will take the majority view as the most plausible exegetical explanation—namely, that both the ones inheriting the kingdom and those with whom the Son of Man identifies

12. See, for instance, Filipe Costas Fontes, "Missão Integral ou Neocalvinismo: Em Busca de Uma Visão Mais Ampla da Missão da Igreja," *FidRef* 19 (2014): 61–72. See also Guilherme Vilela Ribeiro de Carvalho, "A Missão Integral na Encruzilhada: Reconsiderando a Tensão no Pensamento Teológico de Lausanne," in *Fé Cristã e Cultura Contemporânea: Cosmovisão Cristã, Igreja Local e Transformação Integral*, ed. Leonardo Ramos, Marcel Camargo, and Rodolfo Amorim (Viçosa: Ultimato, 2009), 17–55.

13. According to Kirkpatrick ("C. René Padilla," 354), though Lausanne leader John Stott is often credited for the metaphor of the two wings, it actually goes back to Padilla.

14. The event that most notably triggered this controversy happened during the papal visit to Bolivia in 2015, when then president Evo Morales gave Pope Francis an image of Jesus hanging on the hammer and sickle, the symbol of Communism. A number of pastors in Brazil publicly praised the act as a representation of the Christian concern for the oppressed.

15. Pedro Lucas Dulci, *Ortodoxia Integral: Teoria e Prática Conectadas na Missão Cristã* (Uberlândia: Sal, 2015).

16. A similar approach has been advanced regarding theology and culture by James K. A. Smith in his *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

17. Or, in good Gadamerian idiom, by "fusing the two horizons." See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2011), 299–306.

represent authentic disciples—and contend that genuine empathy and concern for the outcast is what evinces true acceptance of God's unmerited favor. The burden of this chapter is to demonstrate that, while social action alone is not of ultimate soteriological consequence for Matthew, it is a nonnegotiable response from those who follow Jesus.

The Saved in the Parable as Models of Integral Orthodoxy

That the gathering of "all the nations" (Matt. 25:32) refers to the moment when the Son of Man will hold all humanity accountable—both Jews and gentiles—is indicated by Matthew's overall expectation that God will execute his universal judgment according to one's response to the authority of Jesus.[18] This theme is explicit in Matthew 5:17–20 and 7:21–23, which depict the Sermon on the Mount as determinative of true righteousness in contrast to the traditions of the Pharisees and the scribes,[19] and in the healing of a centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5–13, wherein faithful gentiles are said to be included "alongside Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven," as opposed to Jews who have rejected Jesus. Klyne Snodgrass is therefore correct to suggest that the other three instances in which "all the nations" occurs outside the parable likewise include both Jews and gentiles (Matt. 24:9–14; 28:18–19; cf. 4:8–9; 8:5–13; 16:27–28; 22:10–14).[20] Pride of place among these references belongs to the Great Commission, wherein the apostles of the resurrected Jesus are ordered to "make disciples of all the nations" (28:19), "until the consummation of the age" (28:20).

More significant is who "these least of my brothers" represent. Since it is apparent that this group belongs to the Son of Man, the simple fact that there is a distinction between them and "the sheep" forces us to discern their identities in relation to one another as well as to all humanity.[21] The motif of God's concern for the outcast has been invoked to support the reading of "these least of my brothers" as the poor in general. For instance, Proverbs 19:17 says that "showing favor to the helpless" is comparable to "lending to

18. This is a reinterpretation of Jewish tradition, which envisages the judgment of the nations apart from Israel (e.g., Joel 3:2; Zech. 14:2; Pss. Sol. 17; 4 Ezra 7). See Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–46; A History of Interpretation*, SBLDS 114 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 255–57. Compare Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 554–55; Kathleen Weber, "The Image of Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31–46," *CBQ* 59 (1997): 59.

19. Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 144; Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, SGBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 31.

20. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 554.

21. Michaels, "Apostolic Hardship," 27.

Yahweh."[22] But, while there is nothing in Matthew contradicting such a trope, three aggregate points suggest more eloquently that the phrase "these least of my brothers" is a reference to persecuted followers of Jesus, whose path was trodden by the apostles themselves.

First, when "brother" (*adelphos*) does not stand for a literal relative in Matthew, it usually refers to the primary audience's fellow Israelites (or members of the church; cf. Matt. 18), never human beings universally. The Sermon on the Mount, with its focus on the eschatological community of the Messiah, provides strong evidence for this (5:22–24, 47; 7:3–5).[23] Second, though the parable is the only place where "brother" occurs beside "least" (*elachistos*, 25:40), the Matthean Jesus consistently uses the expressions "my brothers" (12:48–50) and "one of these little ones" (*hena tōn mikrōn toutōn*, 10:40–42; 18:1–14) to describe early believers in his message (cf. Mark 9:37, 41; Luke 9:48; 10:16; John 13:20).[24] Significantly, some of these instances also bespeak the end-time consequences of welcoming the disciples—that is, people "should not despise them" (Matt. 18:10), because even giving them "a cup of cold water" will count in the end (10:42). Third, in the apocalyptic vision of Daniel 7, the Son of Man not only participates in the universal judgment of the nations (Dan. 7:9–10) but also vindicates the oppressed people of God (7:25). Given that Matthew 25:31–46 assumes the same picture, it is very probable that, as with the Son of Man—who identifies himself with the "saints of the Most High" in Daniel 7:27 (cf. 7:13–14)—the royal judge in the parable regards the suffering disciples as his own relatives.[25] Granted, parables do not always have precise historical counterparts; in this case, the role of "these least of my brothers" would be simply literary, so as to determine the criteria of judgment, not to provide "a basis for an exempt group."[26] Nevertheless, if the saying is to be intelligible, we must consider the possible connections between the specific entities within the passage and the larger

22. For references outside the Hebrew Bible, see Sigurd Grindheim, "Ignorance Is Bliss: Attitudinal Aspects of Judgement according to Works in Matthew 25:31–46," *NovT* 50 (2008): 315–19. For the practice of charity in early Judaism, see Pieter W. van der Horst, "Organized Charity in the Ancient World: Pagan, Jewish, Christian," in *Jewish and Christian Communal Identities in the Roman World*, ed. Yair Furstenberg, AJEC 94 (Boston: Brill, 2016), 120–23.

23. *Pace* Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 556.

24. See Graham Foster, "Making Sense of Matthew 25:31–46," *SBET* 16 (1998): 128–39; Donahue, "'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats," 3–28; J. M. Court, "Right and Left: The Implications for Matthew 25:31–46," *NTS* 31 (1985): 223–33; A. J. Mattill Jr., "Matthew 25:31–46 Relocated," *ResQ* 17 (1974): 107–14; Lamar Cope, "Matthew XXV:31–46: 'The Sheep and the Goats' Reinterpreted," *NovT* 11 (1969): 32–44; Michaels, "Apostolic Hardship," 27–37.

25. Compare with R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 360–62.

26. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 558.

narrative world of Matthew.[27] And, once that is done, understanding "brothers" as disciples proves most compelling.[28]

As for "the sheep," what warrants their partaking in the kingdom is their visible actions toward the destitute in the parable, not their subscription to some abstract system of thought. Against the claims that the passage purports some way of acceptance into eternal life without allegiance to Jesus, however, it is important to bring to mind the prominent Matthean theme of the justice of the heavenly kingdom as something that, in the words of Jonathan Pennington, is actualized "by and through the grace that alone comes from Jesus's saving work" (cf. Matt. 5:3).[29] In short, Matthew never entertains the possibility of earning eschatological deliverance apart from the lordship of the messiah. The question that follows, then, concerns the scope of said benevolent acts, since, as concluded above, the phrase "these least of my brothers" is a cipher for suffering disciples. A number of commentators have concluded that the purpose of the parable is to anticipate the judgment of the nations strictly based on expressions of kindness to the emissaries of Jesus.[30] It is indeed puzzling that "the goats" are reproached not so much for a supposed lack of good works as for their failure to assist those with whom the Son of Man identifies. But this implies that "the sheep" inherit the kingdom simply by being kind to Christian missionaries. The problem with limiting the good deeds, as though significant only when done to the disciples, is that it finds absolutely no corroboration elsewhere in Matthew. Attentive readers of the Gospel would know that the followers of Jesus are called to transcend religious parochialism, seeking the well-being of all, including their own pagan enemies (cf. Matt. 5:43–48; see also Luke 10:25–37).

All things considered, both the identity of the sheep and their good works toward "these least of my brothers" are best interpreted in the context of the

27. As narrative critics have reminded us. See Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

28. In this regard, it is striking that the otherwise excellent treatment by Snodgrass (*Stories with Intent*, 556), while correctly pointing out that the use of "the little brothers of Jesus" in Matthew is varied, does not mention a single passage wherein the term refers to the poor in general.

29. Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 159. For faith as allegiance, see Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

30. E.g., Michaels, "Apostolic Hardship," 27–37; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 744–47; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 605. Compare with David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 609. Indeed, in Did. 12.1, one finds a similar concern: "Let everyone coming in the name of the Lord be welcomed" (*pas de ho erchomenos en onomati kyriou dechthētō*; cf. Did. 11.2). See Court, "Right and Left," 231.

overarching leitmotif of discipleship in Matthew, which finds its closure in the very last pericope of the Gospel (Matt. 28:16–20).[31] The Great Commission, as John Donahue points out, provides a bridge between the ending of the historical career of Jesus and the ending of history itself. If the parable of the sheep and the goats is a portrait of the close of the age, the Great Commission is a mandate for church life prior to that close. The church is to be a community in mission that is to prepare for the coming of Jesus. The disciples are to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and to teach the gospel of the kingdom as disclosed in the life and teaching of Jesus.[32]

In other words, Matthew 25:31–46 depicts the consummation of the age that 28:16–20 envisions: "the sheep" epitomize the people from "all the nations" who take heed of the risen Christ's imperative "to keep all things that I commanded" (28:20). Simply put, "the sheep" are called "the righteous ones" because their deeds attest that they are genuine disciples—they receive Jesus's teachings and keep his commandments. This interpretation coheres with the importance attributed to ethical responsibility in the final speeches uttered by Jesus in Jerusalem (cf. 24:1–25:30),[33] and the portrayal of "the sheep" in the parable neatly fits the overall Matthean characterization of people who live by the righteousness of the kingdom: not only are they generous and hospitable (cf. 5:38–42; 10:40–42),[34] but their lack of recognition of any merit before the Son of Man betrays the quality of self-forgetfulness (cf. 6:1–18).[35] By contrast, the fact that "the goats" are surprised at their own condemnation parallels those in the end of the Sermon on the Mount who call Jesus "Lord"—and even boast some impressive miraculous achievements—but in the end are said to have fallen short of doing "the will of the Father" (7:21–23).

So how does this address the current theological controversies in Brazil? In addition to being the most plausible way of understanding the passage against the backdrop of the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, taking both "these least of my brothers" and "the sheep" as examples of followers of Jesus also helps us to navigate biblically some of the discussions surrounding the mission of the church. The aforementioned approach known as "integral mission" has made some invaluable contributions in retrieving the central place of social action alongside the Christian duty to preach the good news to the world. This

31. See Michael J. Wilkins, *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew's Gospel as Reflected in the Use of the Term* Μαθητης, NovTSup 59 (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 222.

32. Donahue, "'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats," 13–14.

33. For details, see discussion in Via, "Ethical Responsibility," 90. See also Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 432–33.

34. See Joshua W. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 6.

35. Compare with Grindheim, "Ignorance Is Bliss," 319–24.

is consistent with our exegesis of Matthew 25:31–46 and provides a potent instantiation of the holistic character of the mission of the church. But, as explained in the previous section of this essay, a major point of contention has been the proper relation between evangelism and social action. If the two are inseparable, what is the conceptual framework that should bind them together? One realizes the urgency of this question from the simple fact that, as some socially conscious Brazilian evangelicals have recently abandoned the importance of gospel proclamation, a few leaders who are more doctrinally minded, reacting against what they regard as a mild form of apostasy, have fallen once more into the pitfall of overemphasizing preaching over works.

Precisely on this stroke, bringing together Matthew 25:31–46 and integral orthodoxy has the potential to move the conversation forward. Borrowing especially from thinkers of Dutch and Swiss Reformed traditions—not least, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, Herman Ridderbos, and André Biéler—and recognizing the real advancements that the best proponents of integral mission have promoted in Brazil, Dulci suggests that a more principled way of understanding evangelism and social action as one single enterprise is found in the relation between nature and grace.[36] Debates over this issue are ancient, cross-denominational, and at times convoluted, but Dulci's survey can be summarized in quite simple terms: he insists that Christ is Lord over the entire cosmos (grace), and hence the witness of the church must engender transformation in all aspects of human society (nature).[37] He contends that "to say that socio-cultural transformation is not part of God's mission in the world through his Church implies a dire disregard for the scope of his kingdom over creation," and so genuine orthodoxy must be integral and point to the renewal of the whole of our societies.[38] Here, of course, Dulci is in continuity both with some of the ideals of the early Reformers and with the main tenets of the Lausanne movement and integral mission.[39] What is particularly

36. See Dulci, *Ortodoxia*, 119–72. Dulci engages extensively with some (unpublished) ideas of Lutheran missiologist Valdir Steuernagel. Furthermore, it is important to clarify that the concepts of integral mission and integral orthodoxy encompass every aspect of human existence, not only evangelism and social action—e.g., the arts, the sciences, the marketplace, and creation care. See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Great Story and the Great Commission: Participating in the Biblical Drama of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 60–74.

37. Dulci, *Ortodoxia*, 140. See also Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943).

38. Dulci, *Ortodoxia*, 188.

39. Previous attempts at bringing the Reformed tradition to bear in current conversations in the majority world have been done by Sri Lankan missiologist Vinoth Ramachandra, who suggests that John Calvin, with his emphasis on the concrete implications of the gospel, may be considered to some degree the first liberation theologian (Ramachandra, "Reformed Amnesia?," *Vinoth Ramachandra* [blog], March 28, 2013, https://vinothramachandra.wordpress.com/2013/03/28

helpful about Dulci's approach is the specific way he frames the holistic nature of Christian witness. He states, "*The relation between preaching and social action is not one of partnership, complementarity, or miscellaneous priorities*. Rather, it is *an imperatival relation, namely, the responsibility for social transformation as an imperative of the gospel proclamation*. . . . We need to go beyond the simple realization that the proclamation of the gospel and the struggle for social justice are related. It needs to be explained how this connection takes place."[40] In brief, social action is the imperative—the command—that results from the indicative—the reality—of the lordship of the risen Christ. Believing and announcing the latter culminates in living out the former.

It remains to be seen whether Dulci's proposal will remedy the old "evangelism versus social action" dichotomy in Brazil, and this is not the place to offer a detailed critique of his work as a whole. But, in any case, imagining the Christian mission in terms of the gospel's indicative and imperative is useful, given that this is how Matthew also understands the dynamics of discipleship.[41]

In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, all the commandments constituting the messianic law (cf. Matt. 5:21–48) are predicated on the more fundamental reality of the identity of the disciples. In Matthew 5:3–12, Jesus describes his followers in terms of kingdom makarisms—namely, poverty in spirit, mourning, meekness, hunger and thirst for justice, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, and persecution—and, in 5:13–16, he affirms that their raison d'être is to reflect God's character in the world. And these claims are further justified in 5:17–20 by the authority of Jesus vis-à-vis torah.[42] The disciples are to obey the imperatives of the kingdom, because this is what it looks like to be rooted in its indicative: flourishing in the likeness of the one who came to fulfill the law and the prophets.[43] To quote from the Matthean Jesus himself, to be a disciple is to be "complete—integral [*teleioi*]—as the heavenly Father" (5:48).

/reformed-amnesia/). See also Samuel Escobar, "A Evangelização e a Busca de Liberdade, de Justiça e de Realização pelo Homem," in *A Missão da Igreja no Mundo de Hoje: As Principais Palestras do Congresso Internacional de Evangelização Mundial Realizado em Lausanne, Suíça*, ed. Billy Graham et al. (São Paulo: ABU, 1982), 173–94. The best recent treatment on this topic from the anglophone world is found in Wright, *Great Story*, 1–73.

40. Dulci, *Ortodoxia*, 209–10 (emphasis original).

41. See Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1999), 29–30.

42. On Matthew's portrayal of the relationship between Jesus and torah in the Sermon on the Mount, see Bernardo Cho, "To Keep Everything Jesus Commanded: Teaching as Modeling Obedience in the Gospel of Matthew," in *It's about Life: The Formative Power of Scripture; Essays in Honour of Rikk E. Watts on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Bernard Bell et al. (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2023), 34–41.

43. See Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 41–68.

So, Matthew is adamant that the righteousness of the kingdom involves an orthodoxy that is irreducibly integral—so integral that even the motivation for our actions counts (cf. Matt. 6:1–18). By using the anachronistic word "orthodoxy" with reference to the Gospel of Matthew, of course, we are simply translating the evangelist's central concern that discipleship means faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus. On the one hand, service to the poor is not a substitute for accurate belief in what Jesus says, since he never intended "to destroy the law and the prophets" (5:17). On the other hand, a correct understanding of "the law and the prophets"divorced from concrete acts of mercy is not correct at all. Evangelism and social action belong together, and their relation is regulated by the fact that the latter demonstrates the truthfulness of the former. For Matthew, obedience to the imperatives of the gospel is what proves prior acceptance of its indicative. Or, according to another biblical author, "just as the body without spirit is dead, so also the faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). Though body and spirit are equally essential to human existence, one animates the other.[44]

Indeed, as Christopher Wright has recently demonstrated, such an emphasis on the integral character of God's people's vocation—which encompasses correct worship *and* obedience to divine justice—is found not only in Matthew but also across the whole biblical story.[45] "The Bible," Wright states, "is a declaration of the single overall mission of God—to rid his whole creation of evil and create for himself a people redeemed from every tribe and nation of humanity as the population of the new creation."[46] So the injunction in the Great Commission for the disciples "to teach" others "to keep" what Christ ordained (Matt. 28:20) not only takes us back to the Sermon on the Mount's integral orthodoxy but also represents the actual pinnacle of what God always intended for his people: "God wanted his people Israel to be *like God* by showing compassion and seeking justice for the poor and needy, for the homeless, the family-less, the landless. . . . So then, in the same way and in the same tone of voice, Jesus is effectively saying to his disciples, 'Your mission is to make disciples and to teach them to obey what I have commanded you, which, as you know, is deeply rooted in all that God commanded his people in our Scriptures, reflecting my Father's own character as the God of compassion and justice.'"[47]

44. Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 141.

45. Wright, *Great Story*, 1–37. See also Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); and Bernardo Cho, *The Plot of Salvation: Divine Presence, Human Vocation, and Cosmic Redemption* (Carlisle, UK: Langham , 2022).

46. Wright, *Great Story*, xii.

47. Wright, *Great Story*, 95 (emphasis original). See also Cho, "To Keep Everything Jesus Commanded," 42–45.

Consequently, "the sheep" represent true disciples who learned to be integrally orthodox through the fulfillment of the Great Commission, and they remind us that the mission of the church is accomplished by people transformed by the compassion of God himself, as fully demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus. The outcome is that "the nations" (Matt. 28:19) are also taught to be compassionate (cf. 18:21–35). Hence, "the sheep" are called "the righteous ones" because they do not contemplate the preposterous separation between faith and works: "the sheep" inherit the eternal kingdom as integrally orthodox, total disciples of Jesus.

And a similar point should be made regarding "these least of my brothers." They too are models of integral orthodoxy. But the key contrast with "the sheep" is found in their circumstances. Whereas "the sheep" are in the position to serve and welcome the outcast, "these least of my brothers" *have become* the outcast as a result of the righteousness of the kingdom.[48] This indicates that, if hunger and thirst for justice and mercy are transparently evident in the former (cf. Matt. 5:6–7), it is the makarism of being persecuted for the sake of Christ that stands out in the latter at the moment of the Son of Man's final enthronement (cf. 5:10–12). From this perspective, the revelation of "the sheep" unwittingly serving the end-time royal judge as they assisted "these least of my brothers" envisages something even more profound than the undeniable importance of Christians caring for fellow persecuted believers.[49] The reality to which this points is that the true followers of Jesus are so deeply shaped by his self-giving way of life (cf. 16:21–28) that they either strive to alleviate the suffering of the marginalized or find themselves among the many others who are despised by the powers of this passing age (cf. James 2:6–7).[50] "The sheep" encounter the Son of Man in "these least of my brothers" because both groups are walking on the cruciform road of total discipleship, where the risen Christ himself is present "until the consummation of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

A Summons to Total Discipleship

We may conclude that Matthew 25:31–46 not only provides comfort for suffering disciples but also forcefully challenges other Christian readers to take a stance toward the most vulnerable.[51] The immediate implication is twofold:

48. See Michaels, "Apostolic Hardship," 37; compare with Keener, *Matthew*, 606.

49. Donahue, "'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats," 25.

50. Compare with Alicia Vargas, "Who Ministers to Whom: Matthew 25:31–46 and Prison Ministry," *Dialog* 52 (2013): 128–37.

51. Compare Michaels, "Apostolic Hardship," 36–37; Donahue, "'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats," 30–31. Again, to say that Matt. 25:31–46 encourages the reader to assist persecuted disciples is obviously not to claim that acts of mercy should be restricted to Christian

the tendency to diminish the importance of biblical teaching remains untenable, and the view that the Great Commission is merely about imparting doctrinal truths must be deemed reductionistic.

For obvious reasons, Bible-centered Protestants, who presumably form the main readership of this essay, may find the latter statement a bit disturbing.[52] Yet, when read from the standpoint outlined above, the parable forces us to ask how we could teach someone "to keep all things" that Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:20) if our orthodoxy is not integral. As the classic work by Rodney Stark and the more recent study by Pieter van der Horst have demonstrated, one of the features that most clearly differentiated Christians from pagans in antiquity was their significant expanding of the practice of organized charity, originally inherited from Judaism.[53] The fourth-century emperor Julian famously complained to the pagan high priest Arsacius, "When no Jew ever has to beg [*metaitei*] and the impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their own poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us" (*Ep.* 22.430C–D).[54] This gives testimony to the early understanding of the Christian identity in terms of total discipleship—or integral orthodoxy, with indicative ending in imperative, belief leading to obedience, evangelism producing social action.

Furthermore, if our reading of Matthew 25:31–46 has any cogency, then the passage is also about the place where the church is called to locate itself within the power structures of society. Political grandeur is not what characterizes "these least of my brothers," and it is irrelevant in the Son of Man's estimation whether or not some of "the sheep" belonged to the elite. This is not to say that the mission of the church is restricted to the lowly. Rather, at the final manifestation of the eschatological royal judge, the true disciples will be found imitating their crucified King, regardless of their social status. By doing so they will assume a critical stance toward injustice, bringing on themselves opposition from those who claim to rule the world. If the New Testament portrayal of the challenges faced by the earliest Jesus movement

missionaries. It is simply to affirm a key concern of this particular passage. As Wright puts it, "Christian works of compassion or social righteousness" must be "*modeled*" within the church but never "*confined* to believers in the church" (*Great Story*, 104, emphasis original).

52. Dulci himself (*Ortodoxia*, 184–86) gives some examples of the prevalence of such a notion among mainstream evangelical churches in the West. Compare with Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

53. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 73–94; van der Horst, "Organized Charity," 127–28, 145–46.

54. Translation from van der Horst, "Organized Charity," 116 (notes and emphasis original). See also Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 84.

is credible (cf. Acts, 2 Corinthians, Revelation), then we may infer that the suffering of "these least of my brothers" is a direct consequence of their insistence that Jesus Christ alone is Lord.

This makes us ponder how integrally orthodox our engagement in politics has been. In recent decades, the evangelical movement in Brazil has been known much more for its lust for political influence than for its real interest in the well-being of all.[55] As with some of our brethren in North America, Christians on the left have tolerated all sorts of atrocities in the name of taking the place of the rich, and right-wing Christians have effusively applauded politicians who, despite citing biblical verses in their public speeches, have a long record of authoritarianism. As a result of this polarization, the same people who profess the lordship of Christ over the cosmos have divided the church on the basis of ideological preferences, and orthodoxy has been defined in terms of whom one votes for. And worse yet, all of this is to secure primacy in the public sphere. It is unsurprising that missiological conversations in Brazil have foundered on these problems. When one sees this state of affairs through the lens of Matthew 25:31–46, it is difficult not to notice the deep gulf separating this mindset from the character of the Matthean Jesus himself, who in utter dependence on the Father refuses to worship the devil in exchange for hegemony (cf. Matt. 4:1–11).

In this regard, those referred to as "the sheep" and "these least of my brothers" have something important to teach followers of Jesus in the twenty-first century. If Brazilian Christians—or Christians in general—are really to participate in the Great Commission, we must never forget that, at the end of the day, the only "left" and "right" distinction that matters is the one that sets apart the total disciples of the crucified and risen Christ from the rest of humanity.

55. See Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9–58; and Andrea Dip, *Em Nome de Quem? A Bancada Evangélica e Seu Projeto de Poder* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2018), who is significantly more critical of evangelicals.