

Speaking Jesus, by David Buttrick

reviewed by [David Mosser](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

David Buttrick, who through his teaching and writing has shaped a generation of Protestant preachers, admits he is not "a guild-approved" biblical scholar. But he here puts forward a homiletic method for examining the text of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount/

Plain. Including both Matthew's and Luke's version of Jesus' sermon, he takes a careful look at the history of its interpretation as well as its sources. Impressively, Buttrick then analyses the sermon pericope by pericope. One might describe this book as a homiletic commentary, rounded out by some of Buttrick's own sermons to illustrate the perspective he supplies.

Speaking Jesus is aimed at rank-and-file preachers. Buttrick writes about the difficulty of preaching, asserting that "sermons require all the fields of theological study plus all the wonders of an across-the-board liberal arts education." He even admits that he is chiefly concerned "with a smart presentation of the faith." One of the delights of his book is his lively style, spare in theological jargon. He draws his illustrations from real life, for example, using fishing as a metaphor for patient discipleship. Yet though the book avoids specialized language, this is a serious work of homiletic theology.

Buttrick's approach is ecumenical. One of his basic assumptions is that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount does not present an individual ethic. Rather, Jesus preaches the sermon to a community, as he preaches his gospel to the whole church.

Buttrick puts it this way: "The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to a corporate discipleship, and it does demand what might be termed an 'interactional obedience.'"

One of the most helpful sections of *Speaking Jesus* is Buttrick's commentary on the Beatitudes. He helps readers sort out the interpretive options regarding these "blessings." Are we to understand the Beatitudes as promises or ethical urgings? Buttrick attempts to answer this question by suggesting that the word usually translated as either "blessed" or "happy" might today best be understood as

"congratulations."