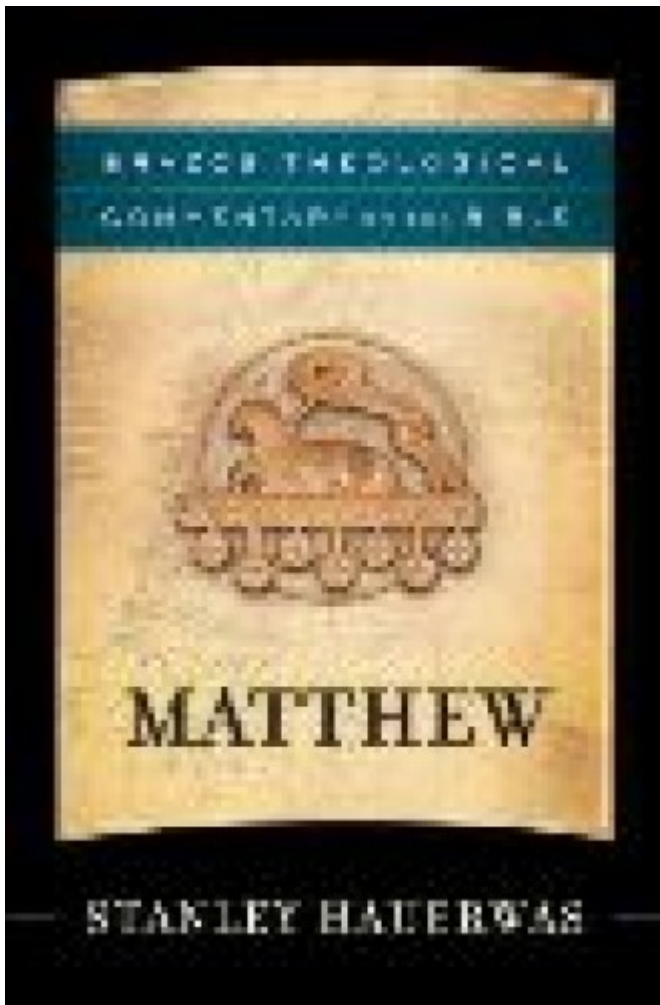


Matthew (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)

reviewed by [A. K. M. Adam](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Matthew (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)

Stanley Hauerwas

Brazos

Commentaries tend to fluctuate between arid, compendious technical analyses and vivid but tendentious tours de force; few of them help readers understand the connection between the biblical texts in question and the theological heritage they inspired.

In response to this difficulty, Russell Reno has inaugurated a new commentary series, the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, that aims to emphasize the theological pertinence of the books of the Bible. To that end, he has commissioned writers who are best known as theologians or historians—rather than following the custom of enlisting experts who have mastered a particular book in its original language and who engage the scholarly technical literature. The result is a series of volumes that embrace the scriptural authors, the church's interpretive tradition and the lives of congregations today.

Stanley Hauerwas contributes the volume on Matthew's Gospel. It is an auspicious opportunity for a theologian whose writings have returned time and again to Matthean themes. This commentary reveals the strong links between Matthew and Hauerwas's own extensive bibliography, and even more the links that connect Hauerwas and Matthew to the works of John Howard Yoder, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and an ecumenical enclave of contemporary theologians.

As Hauerwas works through Matthew's Gospel chapter by chapter, he occasionally cites contemporary biblical scholars; more frequently he explains the relation of a Matthean passage to a classical Christian teaching or the work of a recent theologian. Most often, however, he takes off from a point of departure in Matthew to present an exposition of a doctrinal, ethical or spiritual topic.

As Hauerwas works through the narratives, sermons and parables of Matthew, and especially the Sermon on the Mount, he displays the profoundly biblical basis of the positions he has expounded over the years. Readers who have followed Hauerwas's writings closely will recognize themes, incidents and favorite interlocutors whom Hauerwas draws into a marvelous, improbable quilt of biblical theology. He exercises the prerogative not to parse every participle, instead concentrating on pivotal theological points of the narrative units he covers. He hops from punch line to punch line, emphasizing the theological angles he identifies in the Gospel pericopes.

This approach permits Hauerwas the latitude to lead from his strong suit. By interweaving contemporary and historical narratives with the plot of Matthew's

Gospel, he displays the power of narrative exposition (and suggests by contrast the dryness of technical analysis). Likewise, Hauerwas shows the value of a figurative imagination in biblical reading; he continually draws Matthean motifs together with similar features in the rest of the Bible and shows where subsequent generations found the basis for their doctrinal reasoning. In the passages where Matthew, Hauerwas and their shared interlocutors all strike the same chord, the approach vindicates the value of this series to libraries already glutted with commentaries.

Because Hauerwas's anecdotal approach highlights the punch lines, though, his commentary tends paradoxically to obscure the continuity of Matthew's narrative; the first Gospel is not, after all, a theological greatest-hits album but a composed whole. To the extent that Hauerwas soft-pedals the narrative texture of Matthew's Gospel, he slides past some of the features that would strengthen his case. Similarly, Hauerwas gives the great interpreters of Matthew such prominence that they tend to outshine the evangelist, who, after all, might fairly expect to be the star (or costar, with Jesus) of a book about his Gospel. It is precisely this tendency that triggers the biblical guild's mistrust of theologians who write biblical commentary. At the points where Hauerwas advances interpretations that engage patristic and modern readers more than they engage features of Matthew's Gospel, biblical scholars may conclude that their disciplinary suspicion is well founded.

Their hesitation would not be groundless, but it would miss the vitally important point that Hauerwas is venturing into new terrain where there are few if any contemporary models. The obvious example is Barth's Romans commentary, in which Barth so daringly inhabits Paul's spirit (with a level of success that varies depending on the reader). Hauerwas doesn't take that route; where Barth aims to think with Paul's own mind, Hauerwas professes to respect Matthew's reticence by not saying what he "really meant." That respect warrants appreciation—but Hauerwas steers so clear of saying what Matthew really meant that the commentary seems to focus more on the aftereffects of Matthew than on the Gospel itself.

This commentary serves readers admirably by connecting the points that lie between the first and 21st centuries and by reminding readers that Matthew's Gospel has played a deep, broad role in centuries of theological reflection. The book doesn't undo the problems that beset the commentary genre or resolve the disciplinary conflict between biblical studies and theology, but it does advance the cause of a less problematic, more harmonious theological reading of the Bible. It will appeal most to readers who already appreciate Hauerwas's writings, to preachers,

and to those hardy theological explorers who, with Hauerwas and Reno, persist in seeking a better rhetoric in theological commentary on scripture.