

“Every Christian preacher must preach from the New Testament. The New Testament is made up of different genres of literature, and each section has its own power and problems. Here are the musings of nineteen different scholars who present the challenges and the benefits of these up-to-date ancient writings that should persuade a pastor to study the New Testament again for the first time.”

**Haddon Robinson**, Harold John Ockenga Professor of Preaching, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“You will find in this collection of essays a treasure trove of convictions and insights about preaching the New Testament that can nourish, challenge and enrich any pastor’s sermons. I read it eagerly and thankfully, in agreement and disagreement, but with gratitude throughout.”

**Mark Labberton**, Ogilvie Associate Professor of Preaching and director, Ogilvie Institute of Preaching, Fuller Theological Seminary

“This is a first-rate set of essays from an international slate of contributors—scholars and students of the New Testament who are also preachers themselves. In conversation with the best of evangelical scholarship, they boldly address the challenges facing proclamation of the New Testament in a postmodern context. At once intellectually profound and immediately practical, these studies offer a masterful combination of careful exegesis, incisive theological reflection and balanced homiletical application for the life of the church today.”

**Michael P. Knowles**, George Franklin Hurlburt Professor of Preaching, McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario

# PREACHING THE NEW TESTAMENT

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*Edited by* IAN PAUL & DAVID WENHAM

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>AcT</i>	<i>Acta theologica</i>
AD	Anno Domini (after Christ)
AFCS	Acts in Its First Century Setting
AV	Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CBR</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
<i>CJT</i>	<i>Canadian Journal of Theology</i>
<i>EJT</i>	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
esp.	especially
ET	English Translation
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>

FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>IBS</i>	<i>Irish Biblical Studies</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IVPNTC	Inter-Varsity Press New Testament Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LXX	Septuagint
<i>NETR</i>	<i>Near East School of Theology Theological Review</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
<i>NIDNTT</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , ed. C. Brown, 3 vols. (Exeter: Paternoster, 1975, 1976, 1978)
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version of the Bible
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
nos.	numbers
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NT	New Testament
NTAbh	Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen
NTG	New Testament Guides
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i> OCD</i>	<i>Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> , ed. S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, <i>Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> , 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)
OT	Old Testament
par.	parallel(s)
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version of the Bible
RV	Revised Version of the Bible
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra pagina
<i>SwJT</i>	<i>South Western Journal of Theology</i>

<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>TLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literatur Zeitung</i>
TNIV	Today's New International Version
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
tr.	translation, translated by
<i>TynB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

### 3. PREACHING *JESUS'* PARABLES

*Klyne Snodgrass*

Everyone loves Jesus' parables – or at least *some* of them. The parables of the prodigal, the good Samaritan and the sower are preached on repeatedly, but many of the other parables do not receive much attention and are confusing to many people.<sup>1</sup> The problem, of course, is that many people have already heard sermons on the most famous parables and know what the preacher will say before the words are formed, which is deadly. People justifiably go to sleep. All the parables deserve to be heard, yet we live in a world where some people, indeed many, have not heard any of these stories. How can we communicate with both groups?

The importance of parables both as a message and a means of communication is clear. About one-third of Jesus' teaching in the Synoptic Gospels is in parables, so they are crucial if we are to understand Jesus and his message.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The common lectionary includes most parables but not parallels and not the parables of the leaven or of the faithful and unfaithful servant. No doubt the latter is omitted because of its harshness. The harsh statement on the purpose of parables in Mark 4:10–12 is also omitted. For treatment of this and other issues see my *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
  2. Most works on the historical Jesus, however, give minimal attention to the

They are fictional stories picturing truth, or, as sometimes expressed, ‘imaginary gardens with real toads’. Their power to attract and communicate is evident. Parables are *concrete* and *personal*. They enliven speech, create interest, give focus, make understanding possible and produce insight. They provide a window on life, by implication an important window or they would not be told. They are participatory, for they draw us into something particular and concrete, usually into a narrative world, but people must choose to enter that narrative world, even if they do so unaware or at their own peril. People are drawn to participate in an imaginary world and to make decisions that confront their own world and life. A good parable then creates distance, provokes and appeals. The parable distances one temporarily from one’s own context, provokes to decision or insight and appeals for the decision or insight to be applied to life. To communicate the power of the parables I suggest the following.

### Use concrete and personal language

Notice how politicians nearly always speak about specific people and concrete cases when highlighting a problem or success. People do not care about generalities. We use abstract thought for convenience, but learning takes place most easily with the concrete, particular and personal. Wendell Berry commented, ‘Abstraction is the enemy, *wherever* it is found,’ and added ‘The Devil’s work is abstraction.’<sup>3</sup> Abstraction is viewed so negatively because it is lifeless, general, unrelated to us in its current form, and sometimes even dangerous because of its generalizations and depersonalization. The abstract is not without value. We learn in the concrete, but we store in the abstract. We could not possibly store all concrete particularities, so we generalize and store abstract ideas. The problem is that we then try to teach in the abstract with loss of the personal and still wonder why people do not get it. People need the conviction of good ideas, but they also need the insight provided by particular stories and analogies. Preaching the parables gives people the advantage and power of the concrete in a way that abstract language never can. Preaching

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parables, and books on parables often give inadequate attention to the historical Jesus.

3. ‘Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse’, in *Sex, Economics, Freedom, or Community: Eight Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p. 23 (his italics); and ‘The Gift of Good Land’, in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays, Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco: North Point, 1981), p. 278.

needs to be concrete and personal. Good preaching of parables should engage as much as Jesus' parables did, should recreate the same dynamic, response and insight as Jesus' parables, even though in a different context with *some* different needs.

### Study the advantages of indirect communication

Parables are so effective because they are indirect communication, a point emphasized by Fred Craddock, following Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>4</sup> Children's sermons are a form of indirection. Everyone is aware how much adults enjoy and benefit from children's sermons, often more than from the 'adult' sermon. Since sermons for children are not to or for adults and are concrete rather than abstract, adults leave their defences down and the message has impact. Direct communication often meets resistance, especially if people think they already know the subject. Indirect communication enables, even forces, people to view some other person and subject from a new angle of vision, an angle not their own. Parables then are like Trojan horses.<sup>5</sup> Defences go down, and objectivity and fairness are enabled, which if taken seriously require people to respond *personally*, not in the abstract. Most parables are personal: they tell of another person and call hearers to stand in that person's place and *be* a person. Parables invoke participation.

Søren Kierkegaard made masterful use of parables in confronting the Danish church in just this way to urge one to be an individual, not part of the crowd. His explanation of indirect communication is insightful. He argued all communication of knowledge is direct communication, whereas communication of capability, which persuades people to be and do something, especially that which is ethical, is indirect communication.<sup>6</sup> Capability is what preaching seeks to effect.

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4. See Fred Craddock, *Overbearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), pp. 79–140.
  5. Clarence Jordan and Bill Lane Doulos, *Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1976), pp. 38–43.
  6. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), vol. 1, p. 273, 282–319. He argued that an illusion can never be destroyed directly and that only by indirect means can illusion be radically removed. See his *The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Report to History and Related Writings*, tr. Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 24.

The indirection of parables breaks through our numbness and lack of perception. The problem for frequent churchgoers though is that familiarity has made them numb even to the parables. How can we restore the freshness of the parables? The solution is not in making up some novel interpretation that does not fit with Jesus or breathe the air of first-century Palestine, but in creating some diversion to keep people from thinking they are going down an old path. Two avenues are effective for such diversion. The first is to use further indirection by creating a new parable. Creating new parables that mirror the dynamics and intent of Jesus' parables in a modern context – without being so obvious that they fail – is not easy, but it is a very effective way to preach parables. Preachers need to be, or need to learn to be, capable with both concrete and indirect communication to engage people with theological ideas. Imagination and discernment are crucial, and both can be trained. The second avenue is defamiliarization (or disorientation). If people are numb because of familiarity, preaching can break through by dealing with problems in the text that most people ignore, by giving facts not usually known, or by emphasizing how different Jesus' context was from ours, such as with attitudes towards Pharisees. For example, the parable of the unforgiving servant raises questions whether forgiveness can be rescinded and about the nature of judgment, and it uses almost unthinkable hyperbole with the amount of the first debt. Further, it raises deeply practical and at times problematic issues about the relation of justice, grace, forgiveness, responsibility and judgment. Some feminists recoil from this parable, fearing that abusers might get off easily. How can we do justice to the magnanimous grace of God, the necessity of human forgiveness mirroring God's forgiveness, even in the evil and messiness of life, and the warning of judgment for the failure to forgive? We live in the tensions of life. Of course, like all parables, this one is a *partial* picture, not a full theology. Forgiveness is required of Christians but so also are the realities of naming evil and holding people responsible for evil. Forgiveness deals with the heart of the offended, but it does not mean the offender is not held accountable.

### **Commit to seeing both the text and people**

The pastor must be one who has the ability really to see and hear the text of Scripture, to see and hear parishioners and their world, discern what is needed and be creative enough to know how people must be approached if the parable and the gospel are to be understood. It is about caring enough to take the time to understand people and their needs and actually desiring to

communicate, not just talk. Those who say *listening is the first task of preaching* are correct, both with regard to Scripture and to people. This involves the ability to set ideas and realities in relation, to juxtapose, to draw analogies and to set contrasts. Contrasts are frequent in parables and are an especially effective way to make a point.

Parables urge actually seeing people. One of the most stunning examples is the little parable of the two debtors and its encasing narrative (Luke 7:36–50). After Simon the Pharisee gave the obvious answer to Jesus' question about which debtor loved more, the text says Jesus *turned to the woman* and *asked Simon*, 'Do you see this woman?' Simon had been looking at her the whole meal, but he had not *seen* her, which is an ailment from which we all suffer.

### Keep the parables as *Jesus'* parables

We are not concerned merely with parables; the focus is *Jesus'* parables. I know what people mean by 'preaching the parables', but if it is not too pedantic and if my work *Stories with Intent* has any validity,<sup>7</sup> we do not preach the parables. Like the early church in the book of Acts, we preach Jesus and the kingdom, and parables are a particularly effective medium both for understanding and communicating Jesus' message. Unlike much that occurs in the name of parable interpretation, the parables cannot legitimately be separated from their author. They are *Jesus'* parables. They presuppose and support a theology, that encased in Jesus' teaching. They are not the theology by themselves, nor is it legitimate to derive another theology other than that of Jesus, at least if we claim to be preaching *his* parables. To shift the focus of the parables away from Jesus' context opens the door to manipulation for illegitimate ideological and theological concerns. This is a major problem; and if one doubts that, one should read what books from all sides have done to the parables.<sup>8</sup>

It is one thing to insist on the first-century Palestinian context of Jesus' parables and quite another to do justice to the redactional shaping of the evangelists, the contexts in which they have placed parables and the way they introduced them. We would be foolish to ignore the help such editorial activity offers and foolish not to assess carefully the effect of the redactional shaping and the contextual placement, particularly where *possible* parallels

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7. See n. 1.

8. Reconstructions of parables are never convincing enough or authoritative enough to serve as a foundation for the life of the church.

appear in different contexts. One cannot preach effectively on the parables without noting the differences in the accounts and without determining the significance of the implicit commentary created by the redactional shaping.

A corollary of the insistence that parables should not be separated from Jesus and his first-century context is that any suggested teaching of a parable must be demonstrable from Jesus' non-parabolic teaching. The teaching in parables and that in non-parabolic material are two rails going in the same direction. Jesus did not have one message in the parable genre and another in other forms. We need the cross-check and commentary that each provides for the other. Any suggested interpretation of the *teaching* in a parable that cannot be demonstrated from non-parabolic material is surely suspect.<sup>9</sup>

A further help in treating the parables in Jesus' context is to ask what question the parable is addressing. *Discerning the implied question* Jesus addressed is a signpost towards valid interpretation. For example, surely several parables – the weeds and the wheat, the growing seed, the mustard seed, and the leaven – address the implied question of how the kingdom can be present if evil is still here and if very little evidence of the kingdom is observable.

### Observe literary characteristics

Observe the literary characteristics both within a parable and within the redactional shaping and arrangement of the evangelists. No one will grasp the focus of Luke's parable of the banquet (14:15–24) who does not see Luke's grouping of several texts on meals, how he develops his explanation of discipleship and how he repeatedly uses the word *kaleō* (call, invite) twelve times in chapter 14,<sup>10</sup> which requires a reconsideration of the nature of Israel's election in the light of Jesus' coming.

Special attention should be given to key turning points in parables, particularly poignant expressions, contrasts, questions, the rule of end stress, and reversal of expectation. This entails more than seeing the facts of the narrative; it involves seeing the power and contour of the text. Key turning

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9. Ernest Van Eck ('Review of *Stories with Intent?*, *Review of Biblical Literature* 10 [2008], pp. 1–6) attempted to argue against this principle by saying the parables have violence that is contrary to Jesus' teaching of non-retaliation. He makes the mistake of confusing elements of genre, the violence in the parables, for the *teaching* of the parable. The parables do not teach violence, and no one ever thought they did.
10. Including *antikaleō* in v. 12.

points indicate a movement towards resolution or success (or failure). Luke 15:17 uses poignant words about the prodigal by saying, 'He came to himself,' which is the beginning of the resolution and substance for deep thought. The parable of the Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:9–14) contrasts two men at prayer and has that poignant prayer – in the shadow of the temple and possibly during the morning or evening sacrifice – 'Be gracious/propitiated [*bilasthētē*] to me, the sinner.'<sup>11</sup> In a reversal of expectations the known sinner, not the presumed righteous man, is acquitted.

One aspect of literary concern has to do with time. Parable time is not real time, most evident perhaps with Matthew's parable of the wedding feast, where the meal is kept ready until after a war. It *does not work* to lay real time on parable time, as is evident when people become concerned that the invitation to the poor in Luke's parable of the banquet (14:21) is extended only after the rich have refused, or when Luke's two invitations are explained as the ongoing mission to Jews and to Gentiles or to the early and later Gentile mission. They are parables, not chronological or literalistic mirrors of reality or whole theologies.

Another literary aspect is that sometimes reality intrudes into a parable. When a master says, 'Enter into the joy of your master' (Matt. 25:21), the parable world has given way to the reality depicted. Parables sometimes do this, and it is not by default the work of the evangelist. A most obvious example from the Old Testament is Ezekiel 23:1–49, which describes the whoredom of two sisters, but already in verse 4 and at several places the reader knows the two sisters are Samaria and Jerusalem. Reality shines through the parabolic form when the prophet confronts emphatically or when the parable teller has no need to guard indirection, as is the case in parables directed to disciples.

### **Shun both allegorizing and dogmas that parables have only one point**

The crucial issue in parable interpretation is and always has been how much of a parable corresponds to something else, that is, how many 'points' a parable has. Historically the church allegorized virtually every feature of a parable, usually in directions that have no relation to Jesus' teaching, and consequently Adolf Jülicher threw out all allegorizing, insisted that parables have only one point of comparison between image and reality, and thought the point of a

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11. All translations from the Bible in this chapter are my own.

parable may be expressed as a general religious principle.<sup>12</sup> Jülicher's dictum about one point has often been asserted by people who have no concept of its origin. It took almost a century for the complaints against Jülicher to gain traction, but his views are largely rejected today. The idea that parables have only one central truth is like the use of training wheels to wean people off allegorizing.

The concern in parable interpretation though should *not* be on the questions 'What does this element stand for?' or 'How many correspondences are there?' even though correspondences may exist and may be identified. Parables are analogies, and the longer ones could not do their task without correspondences. Correspondences help determine the reference of the analogy, but they may be *inexact and partial* to maintain the cover of indirection.<sup>13</sup> The concern is the analogy, not the correspondences. Each parable must be approached in its own right, and I do not think formulas can be set that determine how many points a parable has. A parable may have as many points as it needs. The real issue is *how the analogy functions*, but parables are *not* one-for-one analogies, as if reality and image were connected by an equal sign. They picture actual realities *partly*, but are intended to make people think and question, and they do so often through hyperbole, surprise and *inexactness*. People want each parable to be a complete theology. *They never are*. As with metaphor generally, there is always an 'is' and an 'is not' with parables.

So, how much of a parable is important? All of it. Nothing is in a parable for no reason, but that does not mean each element has allegorical significance. We need greater literary sensitivity than that. Some elements in longer parables have correspondence and some do not, but they still have resonances. They set off bells that allude to Scripture texts, such as the harvest and sickle in the parable of the growing seed (Mark 4:26–29), imagery drawn from Joel 3:13 that resonates of God's judgment. Some of the elements in parables are there to heighten narrative tension, and some may have minor roles in the narrative with no theological relevance. Asking what has *prominence* in the story and remembering the *rule of end stress*<sup>14</sup> are ways to keep from being side-tracked. The parable of the vineyard workers in Matthew 20 is instructive. It has only two main characters – the owner and the first group hired. What of

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12. Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Freiburg i. B.: Akademische Verlagsbuchhandlung von J. C. B. Mohr, 1888, 1889).

13. Note the inexactness of the correspondences in Nathan's parable to David in 2 Sam. 12:1–7. Bathsheba is not the one who dies.

14. That the important part is at the end.

the other hirings or the steward? They have no theological relevance. The five hirings heighten narrative tension. The last hiring is needed for the contrast with the first, but the parable would be much less effective with only the first and last. The mention of the steward allows the owner's directions to pay the last hired first and creates distance between the first hired and the owner to give space for the grumbling. Obviously issues of redactional shaping must be considered too.

### **Study parables that have the same form to see how various kinds of parables function**

Not all parables look or act the same. Grouping parables according to form provides insight, not least in determining how much of a parable has significance. Some reject any idea of classification of parables, saying that we should just call them all parables as the New Testament does.<sup>15</sup> Any classification system is an imposition, yes, and no first-century reader classified parables or would have understood our classification systems. However, the New Testament uses *parabolē* for forms we would not, such as the proverb in Luke 4:23 or the riddle in Mark 3:23, so we do classify one way or another, even if it is only for distinguishing such uses or distinguishing between short and long parables. If certain parables are alike in form, it is myopic not to analyse the various forms and learn how they function. The only valid questions are whether a classification system is something we lay on parables or something learned from them and whether the system is flexible enough or a procrustean bed to which parables must conform.

I did not intend to create a classification system for parables, but late in my work felt constrained to because other systems were not sufficient and much was to be learned by doing so. Parables are indirect communication, most *doubly* indirect but some *singly* indirect. Double-indirect parables divert one's attention from oneself *and* from the subject of concern. They are about someone or something else *and* some other topic other than the one under discussion so that defences go down.<sup>16</sup> For example, the parable of the two builders is about someone else *and* another subject, building, while the concern is really about wise living in response to Jesus' message. Single-indirect parables

15. E.g. R. Zimmerman, 'How to Understand the Parables of Jesus: A Paradigm Shift in Parable Exegesis', *AcT* 29.1 (2009), pp. 157–182, esp. 167–169.

16. For broader treatment see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, pp. 9–17.

are about another person, not the hearer, but *are about the topic* at hand. They are singly indirect. The rich fool is an obvious example;<sup>17</sup> it is about another person but about money, the subject of concern.

Under double-indirect parables I distinguish similitudes (extended analogies *without a plot*), interrogative parables (those beginning with ‘Who from you?’, a question often lost in translations to the detriment of understanding), narrative parables (extended analogies *with a plot*) and a particular kind of narrative parable, the juridical parable that forces one to decide against oneself (like Nathan’s parable to David). A further category, based on logic, is evident in ‘how much more’ parables that can be either singly or doubly indirect.

While classification may appear at first unimportant for preaching, actually such awareness contributes crucial insights. This is most obvious with the interrogative parables. All these parables beginning ‘Who from you?’ (including Jewish and Greek examples) expect the *negative* answer ‘No one.’ For example, ‘What man from you having a hundred sheep and having lost one will not leave the ninety-nine in the pasture and go for the lost until he finds it?’ (Luke 15:4) means *no one* would neglect going after a lost sheep; it is what is expected for any rational person. Classification also helps with regard to the question of what elements have significance. Only the *important* people and elements of double-indirect parables have correspondence between image and reality. In a single-indirect parable like the rich fool the man and his barns do not stand for something else. In a similitude like the growing seed the farmer and the stages of growth do not stand for something else, and the attempts to decide whether the farmer stands for God, Jesus or the disciples in the analogy just do not work. The woman, the leaven and the loaves in the similitude of the leaven do not stand for anything. As with all parables, but especially the similitudes, *the analogy is about the whole process*. The present kingdom is like the process of a small, virtually unseen beginning, but the end will bring a full and pervasive result. In interrogative parables such as the friend at midnight, the two men, the family and the bread do not stand for something else, and no neighbour would refuse the request. The parable functions as a ‘how much more’ parable. If a friend will respond to a request even from a rude neighbour, how much more will God respond to our requests?

The double-indirect parables with a plot are usually longer, and the important elements *do* have significance. The analogy involved with the father, the

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17. There are five single indirect parables, all in Luke, with the other four being the good Samaritan, the unjust steward, the rich man and Lazarus, and the Pharisee and the tax collector.

prodigal and the elder brother cannot work without correspondences with God, sinners and self-righteous people. Do the far country, the squandering, the robe, the calf, and so on have significance? They have significance, but they do not have correspondences to some theological reality. They have resonances that depict prodigality, restoration and celebration.

If a parable has several correspondences, does it still have only one meaning? The question is naive. Parables, like other literature, have communicative intent – our concern is the communicative intent of Jesus, but any writing has *layers* of significance and we would be remiss not to sense these. The issue with parables is always the *function of the analogy*. Preaching should focus on the function of the analogy and should seek to draw out the significance of that function for modern hearers. Within that function various theological aspects may be present and can be cross-checked with non-parabolic teaching. In other words, there may be numerous ways within the intent of an analogy by which a parable might be appropriated for a modern audience.

### Focus on the theology of the parables

To speak of the theology of parables may raise questions. Some scholars in the past discouraged deriving theology from parables, saying that theology should instead be sourced from the letters of the New Testament. But if we are not to derive theology from the parables, why are we reading them? Also it has been popular to say that parables cannot be translated into abstract thought, so their stories may be discarded. Parables should not be reduced to abstract language and should certainly not be discarded, but they can be explained, as all the books on parables assume. The parables are there to give insight into God, the kingdom, the mission of Jesus to Israel and the nature of discipleship. Especially in preaching, the parables themselves remain the most effective way to convey the teaching in them. In some way and at some point the sermon should focus on retelling the parable, preserving as far as possible the dynamics and details of the original.

Doing theology from the parables requires knowing the limits of the analogy. The goal is always the function of the analogy, and the key is knowing when to *stop* interpreting. As with metaphor, parable interpretation is about understanding both the limits and the significance of the analogy.

With reference to theology, we must not forget that parables mean other than what they say. They are not about farming techniques, seeds or interesting people of the past. They point beyond themselves to another reality, the teaching of Jesus. One must discern that to which they point and its

significance. That is why one is challenged to hear and discern their intent with expressions such as ‘If anyone has ears to hear, let that person hear’ (Mark 4:9). The only way to discern their intent is from understanding the context from which they emerge and to which they belong, the teaching of an eschatological restoration Prophet named Jesus. One can put them in another context, as many do, but they will no longer be the parables of Jesus. Jesus’ parables and virtually all those in the Old Testament are prophetic instruments. Parables are a rhetorical strategy prophets used to confront, to instruct and to persuade – in Kierkegaard’s words, to deceive people into the truth.<sup>18</sup>

### **Focus on the identity displayed or called for in the parable**

I am convinced that hermeneutics must focus on identity as an important goal of interpretation. Scripture seeks to tell us who we are, and the parables portray the identity of God, of the kingdom and of various kinds of people. That makes up much of their theology. For example, the parable of the prodigal, in addition to providing a powerful description of one aspect of God’s identity, is a discourse on identity. The leaving and squandering of the prodigal place him at odds with all his true identity stands for. They are an attempt to ‘unson’ himself,<sup>19</sup> but ‘he came to himself’, to a realization of an identity he dared not claim. He attempted to persuade the father to allow him to be someone else, a slave, but the father insisted he was a son, an identity restored and celebrated. A similar dynamic takes place with the elder brother, and identity is a factor in some way in most parables.

### **Do not run from the difficulties**

We must not run *from* the difficulties, but run *to* them, for therein lies the opportunity for insight and growth. Some themes of the parables make people uncomfortable, especially judgment and the demand for obedience, but parables are prophetic instruments, and no prophet, especially Jesus, had a mission to make his hearers comfortable or lax in regard to obedience. Judgment and obedience cannot legitimately be ignored, even though people

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18. *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, p. 288.

19. Miroslav Wolf’s expression; see his *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 158.

try desperately to do so.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, they are essential aspects of Jesus' message and of Christian faith. But how will we deal with the violent language of some parables?

### Let the Bible be an ancient book

Sometimes parables are as messy as life itself. They mirror the evil in the world and use that evil for the purpose of warning. We cannot sanitize the parables, even when they confront our polite sensibilities, but nor can we read the parables as first-century Semites did – unless we have theological amnesia. We will read and should read as twenty-first-century people; we can do no other. We read conscious of two millennia of world and church history, of evil, failure, holocausts, and even progress. We read hopefully as twenty-first-century people aware of and grieving over history and aware that these first-century parables were not told to us and do not address our agendas, but that they are relevant to us and instructive for us in understanding Jesus' intent and its relevance for our lives. We dare not force Jesus' parables to mirror our context or read them as if they are theological pictures addressed to our context. The parables are theological tools providing a vision of the kingdom – a kingdom of celebration, compassion, of wise living and of the restoration of Israel – and enabling our discussions of the dynamics of forgiveness, the nature of evil, and other issues.

The violent language in some parables *does not teach or condone* violence. It mirrors the seriousness of God's judgment. Dealing with this language will mean understanding it as *parabolic* language rather than in some literalistic fashion. God does not have torturers or dichotomize people, as Matthew 18:34–35 and 24:51 might suggest, and the language of torment for the rich man in Luke 16 is not a depiction of actual circumstances. Such language, like much of Jesus' other teaching, is hyperbole (such as pulling an eye out or cutting off an arm) and is intended to shock and move people to action. The non-parabolic teaching of Jesus provides a good check against taking the hyperbole literally.

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20. Note how often Robert Capon ends up arguing parables mean the opposite of what they say; e.g. his 'dog biscuit' approach to the parable of the wheat and weeds. Jesus was throwing a dog biscuit to the disciples, condescending to their craving, but he did not really believe in the judgment comments he made. See his *Parables of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), pp. 127–131.

### **Aim for response**

The parables are intended to cause hearing, to enable seeing and to elicit response. They challenge people actually to hear and respond. As with the parable of the sower, mere hearing is not enough; the only valid response is productive living. Preaching parables accordingly should always be a call to respond and act. But what moves people to respond? *Proximity produces impact.* Hearers must be brought close to both the speaker and the scriptural teaching; otherwise there will be no response. Proximity is established through identification of the speaker with the hearers so the hearers feel the speaker is one with them, understands and shares common ground. Proximity is also established through insight and solutions offered for perceived problems. It is also established by the hearer being ushered into a narrative world, the very work that parables do.

Obviously there are other avenues for preaching on parables, such as setting parables in relation to other biblical texts. What is clear though is that parables can be one of the most effective avenues for preaching, but here as elsewhere creativity, sensitivity and attention to the task are required. Let the one with ears hear.

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