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## Imitating the Genre of Parable in Today's Pulpit

Timothy R. Sensing

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## Imitating the Genre of Parable in Today's Pulpit

TIMOTHY R. SENSING  
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Parables have long held a special place in the hearts of preachers. Even a brief historical examination of sermons will uncover the love of parables by preachers and the use of the deductive method as the sermon structure of choice. However, explanation is not Jesus' standard procedure when telling parables. The church through the centuries has explained the parables to the point of eliminating both the form and function of the genre. This one-sided emphasis demands a reevaluation and consequently a restoration of the genre of parable in our pulpits.

### *Parable Interpretation*

Through the centuries men have buried the parables under years of diverse interpretations.<sup>1</sup> The church fathers followed the allegorical method championed by Origen.<sup>2</sup> During the Reformation years Luther and Calvin rejected the allegorical method, opting for only a literal level. Yet allegory was still the method of choice among scholars. Not until Adolf Jülicher,

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<sup>1</sup>Many excellent works summarize the history of parable research. E. C. Blackman, "New Methods of Parable Interpretation," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 15 (1969):3-13; Wilfrid J. Harrington, "The Parables in Recent Study (1960-1971)," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 72: 219-241; Jack Dean Kingsbury, "Major Trends in Parable Interpretation," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42 (1971):579-596; idem, "The Parables of Jesus in Current Research," *Dialog* 11 (1972):101-107; Norman Perrin, "The Parables of Jesus as Parables, as Metaphors, and as Aesthetic Objects: A Review Article," *The Journal of Religion* 47 (1967):340-346; Robert H. Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," *Word & World* 5 (1985):248-257 (Hereafter cited as "Recent"). Note especially Warren S. Kissenger, *Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup>Origen introduced the threefold method of interpretation taken from 1 Thess. 5:23, which sees the "body" of a text as the literal meaning, the "soul" of the text as the moral meaning, and the "spirit" of the text as the spiritual meaning. It is this third category which gave rise to the allegorical method. This continued throughout the Middle Ages with the addition of a fourth level of interpretation called the "heavenly level." Stein, "Recent": 248.



however, did the one-level approach dominate. Jülicher believed a parable was only a single metaphor with only one point of reference and that the details of a parable should not be pressed for meaning, for they add only local coloring and background.<sup>3</sup>

Redaction critics seek the Evangelists' own theological emphasis. Jeremias focuses on what he considers to be later editorial emendations to the text believing the early church adapted the parables (wresting them from their original context) and used them for their own purposes.<sup>4</sup> He also attempts to translate them back to the Aramaic, which Jesus spoke.<sup>5</sup> C. H. Dodd introduces the concept of "weapons of warfare" in which Jesus sought to defend himself and attack the prejudices of his audiences.<sup>6</sup> This often entails changing the setting and audience as given by the Evangelist. Dodd and Jeremias also follow Jülicher by reducing the parable to either a moral or eschatological point.<sup>7</sup> They leave us in the past with no message for modern man. Parables are more dynamic and demanding than mere propositions.<sup>8</sup> When one reduces the parable to proposition, both the form and the power of the parable are lost. Wilder argues that the form and content of a parable are inseparable. He condemns the methods which state that the message can stand independent of the form.<sup>9</sup> Via sees the one-point approach as destroying the aesthetic nature of the parable along with its function and effect.<sup>10</sup>

The methods of the redaction critics depend on their own hypothetical reconstructions. This is why each scholar finds the "one point" to be different.<sup>11</sup> When the parable is reduced to one propositional point, the

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 249.

<sup>4</sup>Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 18. Jeremias gives ten examples of how the early church adapted the parables: (1) translating them from Aramaic to Greek; (2) representational changes; (3) embellishments; (4) influence of the Old Testament and of folk-story themes; (5) change of audience; (6) hortatory use; (7) influence of the church's historical context; (8) allegorizing; (9) through the collection and fusion process; (10) changing the setting.

<sup>5</sup>Robert H. Alberts, "Perspectives on the Parables, Glimpses of the Kingdom of God," *Word & World* 4 (1984):439. [Hereafter "Perspectives"]

<sup>6</sup>Stein, "Recent":251.

<sup>7</sup>A. M. Hunter, *The Parables Then and Now* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 148.

<sup>8</sup>Charles E. Carlston, "Changing Fashions in Interpreting the Parables," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 14 (1974):227.

<sup>9</sup>Stein, "Recent":253.

<sup>10</sup>Dan Otto Via, *The Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 90, 92.

<sup>11</sup>Via, *Parables*, p. 3.



application then is made with reduced didactic language and the parable form is expendable.<sup>12</sup> The organic unity of the parable with each part contributing the nature of its point is lost.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus' audience was a diverse group. The one-idea approach truncates the parable even for those who originally heard it.<sup>14</sup> This reduction of the parable to one propositional truth continues in today's pulpit, thus robbing the genre of its power.<sup>15</sup>

The "new hermeneutic" has also affected parable research.<sup>16</sup> Ernst Fuchs emphasizes Jesus' understanding of human existence, an existential interpretation of the text.<sup>17</sup> There is necessary involvement of the author in the text he has created, giving power to the text itself. This new word of Jesus, then, confronts the hearer with what it truly means to be human.<sup>18</sup>

This approach gave rise to structural analysis (the study of the deep structures of meaning below the surface of the narrative and the patterns that operate unconsciously in the author's mind) and the aesthetic critical perspective (artistic similes and metaphors which become language events).<sup>19</sup> The second of these concerns this present study. Although Dodd does not represent this school of thought, he does introduce the seed thought. He states:

The parables, however, have an imaginative and poetical quality. They are works of art, and any serious work of art has significance beyond its original occasion. No pedantry of exegesis could ever prevent those who

<sup>12</sup>Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 135.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, p. 147.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>15</sup>This is seen in Eta Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables* [Hereafter Jesus], trans. John Sturdy (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 24, when she states that the "picture-part" of a parable and the "reality-part" should not be mixed. To make points from the "picture-part" is to assume too much. The "reality part" consists of only one point and contains the purpose and intent of Jesus. Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), p. 40, also states this with the term "single response" of the hearer.

<sup>16</sup>Bultmann's classical classification of stylistic laws that govern popular narrative is summarized from his *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford, 1963) in Linnemann, *Jesus*, pp. 12-16.

<sup>17</sup>Jack Dean Kingsbury, "Ernst Fuchs' Existentialist Interpretation of the Parables," *Lutheran Quarterly* 22 (1970):382.

<sup>18</sup>Norman Perrin, "The Modern Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus and the Problem of Hermeneutics" [Hereafter "Jesus"] *Interpretation* 25 (1971):144.

<sup>19</sup>Alberts, "Perspectives":439.



have "ears to hear," as Jesus said, from finding that the parables "speak to their condition." Their teaching may be fruitfully applied and reapplied to all sorts of new situations which were never contemplated at the time when they were spoken. But just understanding of their original import in relation to a particular situation in the past will put us on right lines in applying them to our new situation.<sup>20</sup>

Via believes the parables are self-standing creations of art possessing a beauty and power in and of themselves, independent of their author and having a life of their own. Because of the autonomous nature of the parables, the intent of the author is neither necessary nor desirable.<sup>21</sup> The original author may not have known the full implications of his work due to the nature of language. The text may contain meanings of which the author was not aware.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, form can be lifted and transposed into images of perennial human experience. This existential interpretation seeks the patterns of human behavior, the paradigms of existence, and the picture of God's relation to man. These truths have timeless significance and applications beyond the historical reference.<sup>23</sup> This literary approach allows the parables to make their own impact upon the hearer in every new culture apart from the author's original intent.<sup>24</sup>

Language is subject to historical change and may be different in various situations.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult, therefore, to specify once and for all what parables mean.<sup>26</sup> The metaphor is creative of meaning and the bearer of that very reality to which it refers. It is a language event not because it is a parable

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<sup>20</sup>C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), p. 195. Aesthetic criticism is seen in the works of Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Funk, *Language*; Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). Representing aesthetic criticism in its extreme form is Via, *Parables*. These men follow their own blend of literary criticism and redaction criticism with Via rejecting all historical studies. As a precursor to these men, see Geraint Vaughan Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables* (London: SPCK, 1964).

<sup>21</sup>Via, *Parables*, p. 77. Via means by the term *autonomous*: Parables have no point of reference with the author or setting. Since they stand independent, it is the internal meaning that has significance.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>23</sup>Perrin, *Jesus*, p. 163.

<sup>24</sup>Stein, "Recent":253.

<sup>25</sup>Perrin, *Jesus*, p. 163.

<sup>26</sup>Funk, *Language*, p. 135.



of Jesus but simply because it is a parable.<sup>27</sup> The language event is different for different people because of its polyvalent nature. It engages the hearers and compels them to participate in an existential experience. This open-ended nature of the extended metaphor is the reality that encounters the hearer, bringing him to the place of decision.<sup>28</sup>

This does bring the reader back to the present form of the text without the reconstructions of the redaction critics. However, the original level of meaning intended by the author is necessary to understand the metaphorical level. There is a cultural bridge to cross. Jesus gave the parables to a particular people in a given cultural setting living in a specific time in history. Parables did not exist for their own sake like fairy tales, riddles, or songs, but were composed to serve a particular purpose.<sup>29</sup> The language event is first a historical event that cannot be stripped of its context as an eternal truth. The historical form is not accidental and neither is the setting coincidental. "What is meant" must come before "what it means." Without this, the language event becomes only a creation of the exegete.<sup>30</sup> Jesus' statement "He who has ears" is not equal to "Let anyone find whatever meaning is contained in this literary form." Nor is it "Let the hearers be interpreted by this metaphor as they will."<sup>31</sup>

The avoidance of the historical context opens the door for a host of interpretations.<sup>32</sup> The historical setting places boundaries and gives direction for crossing that cultural bridge. A fusion of these two methodologies is needed so that the parable can impact the hearer as a word from God. Today's preacher needs the historical, the aesthetic, and the existential understanding of the text. Any of these left alone will lead to a faulty interpretation in one direction or the other.

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<sup>27</sup>Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 66.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, p. 67. See *Via in Parables*, pp. 72-74, for a complete description of the aesthetic nature of the parable.

<sup>29</sup>Linnemann, *Jesus*, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup>Bailey, *Poet*, p. 29. Linnemann, *Jesus*, p. 34, states that without the historical background the interpreter will yield only theological utterances or moral demands that may or may not be equal to the original meaning. The modern setting will often interfere and prejudice by clouding the true meaning of the text.

<sup>31</sup>Stein, *Introduction*, p. 68. Wilder, in *Early*, states, "We must go all the way in this matter of context and see them [parables] in Jesus' own situation. Then their real authority and power emerge." Jesus' faith and vision give power to the parable, p. 93.

<sup>32</sup>Stein, p. 69.



*Definition of Parable: Then and Now*

For a complete understanding of parable the term *mashal* must be examined.<sup>33</sup> In keeping with the Hebrew *mashal*, the parables of Jesus are flexible and cover a broad range of forms.<sup>34</sup> The *mashal* has a poetical nature that calls the hearer to an understanding that is different from the explicit rhetoric. This is often done by holes in the narrative which leave the hearer with unanswered questions.<sup>35</sup> The impact of the *mashal* is seen in its capacity to combine brevity of form with a description of the complex and ambiguous or contradictory nature of human reality, often resulting in two possible paradoxical interpretations.<sup>36</sup>

Dodd gives an excellent definition for parable:

At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.<sup>37</sup>

Many parables are normal concerning their expectations (e.g., good servants are rewarded and bad servants are punished). Each can know and expect such orderly outcomes.<sup>38</sup> The normalcy of some parables, however, is not apparent and is even contradicted. There is a reversal that takes place. The Parable of the Vineyard is the clearest example.

Jesus spoke as one having authority, in the minds of the multitudes, not because they saw him as divine but because of the impact of his words.<sup>39</sup> He appealed to their family backgrounds, vocations, or present situations by weaving homespun tales of intrinsic interest. In so doing he could

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<sup>33</sup>For a complete discussion of *mashal* see Wilder, *Early*, p. 72, and David Stern, "The Rabbinic Parable: From Rhetoric to Poetics," *Society of Biblical Literature: Seminar Papers*, Kent Harold Richards, ed. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), pp. 631-643. The variety of forms the *mashal* could take matches the purpose of the paper, for it is the variety of forms that needs imitating in the pulpit. The example in Matt. 20 (discussed below) is a definite narrative parable.

<sup>34</sup>Wilder, *Early*, p. 72.

<sup>35</sup>Stern, "Rabbinic," pp. 642-643.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Dodd, *Parables*, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup>John Dominic Crossan, "The Servant Parables of Jesus," *Society of Biblical Literature: Seminar Papers*, George MacRae, ed. (Chicago, IL: Palmer House, 1973), p. 98.

<sup>39</sup>Linnemann, *Jesus*, p. 34.



communicate in vivid fashion on multiple levels of meaning. The parables remain effective tools to bring about behavioral change on multiple levels.<sup>40</sup>

The parable uses a variety of techniques in various combinations. Recurrent plot-patterns, reversal, rhetorical hyperbole, rhythm, assonance, chiasmus, parallelism, inversion, and parabolic ballad are some of these techniques.<sup>41</sup> Narrative parables usually exhibit common characteristics: (1) There are three principal characters. (2) There is evidence of careful composition. (3) The use of simple vocabulary often in direct discourse leads to a concise plot. (4) There is little embellishment to the story lines or characters.<sup>42</sup> Parables follow the pattern of opening, development, and crisis-denouement. The development and crisis-denouement are marked, as a rule, by phrases of temporal sequence.<sup>43</sup> This everyday story asks "What is wrong with this picture?" The shock of turning the everyday upside down is done by intensification, hyperbole, and paradox.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Existential Possibilities for Preaching*<sup>45</sup>

A parable is not merely a sign or an example illustrating meaning but is a bearer of the very reality contained in it. It grasps the listener. The listener is not the one who interprets the parable, the parable interprets him. It compels the hearer to respond. The parable itself (not just the meaning) enacts the language event.<sup>46</sup> The parable triggers the will and the affections as well as the reason, thus provoking response.<sup>47</sup> The surprise element woven

<sup>40</sup>Vance L. Shepperson, "Paradox, Parables, and Change: One Approach to Christian Hypnotherapy," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 9 (1981):7.

<sup>41</sup>Amos N. Wilder, *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths*, James Breech, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 93. Bailey, *Peasant*, p. 44. Bailey also gives seven steps needed to identify structure within parabolic narratives (p. 74).

<sup>42</sup>Robert W. Funk, "The Narrative Parables: The Birth of a Language Tradition," *God's Christ and His People: Studies in Honour of Nils Alstrup Dahl*, Jacob Jerrell and Wayne A. Meeks, eds. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977), pp. 43-44.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>Funk, *Language*, pp. 158, 161.

<sup>45</sup>Kingsbury, "Current Research," gives a review of both the positive value and relevant criticism of the existential approach.

<sup>46</sup>Stein, *Parables*, p. 254. Wilder, *Early*, p. 71, quotes Gerhard Ebling on this point: "The art of the parable . . . is none other than that of bringing the hearer face to face with what it is to be human and thereby to make clear what it means for God to draw near."

<sup>47</sup>Robert W. Funk, "Phenomenology of Language and the New Testament," *The Journal of Bible and Religion* 34 (1966):206. Eduard Schweizer, "Preaching on the Parables," *Biblical Preaching: An Expositor's Treasury*, James W. Cox, ed.



into a realistic narrative suggests that the divine dimension crosses everyday reality to produce a crisis of ultimate importance in the midst of the ordinary. Our existence depends on whether we will accept the divine element.<sup>48</sup>

The impact of a parable is much like a well-crafted joke. The punch line cannot be anticipated but suddenly pops out. It is not business as usual. There is either momentary or permanent disorientation caused by the element that has jabbed through the pretensions of the audience.<sup>49</sup> This reversal causes the logic of the everyday to be broken by the logic of the parable. This opens the door for a radically new reality.<sup>50</sup> The hearer not only is informed about reality but also participates in it. Jesus involves the listener in his own inner faith.<sup>51</sup> The parable is not finished until the listener is drawn into it as an active participant, either implicitly or explicitly making judgments about the matter at hand.<sup>52</sup> A parable goes into a person's psychological patterns that are rooted deep in his subconscious.<sup>53</sup>

Jesus' words often bridged over deep opposition. He started with "That's how it is." The movement away from the normal is often quite subtle. Finally the "That's how it is" is shattered by the parable. Many received his message with joy, for it opened the door from this world to the other world.

(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 358, states: "The hearer must experience on the conscious and the subconscious level."

<sup>48</sup>Via, *Parables*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>49</sup>William G. Doty, "The Parables of Jesus, Kafka, Borges, and Others, with Structural Observations," *Society of Biblical Literature: Seminar Papers*, George MacRae, ed. (Chicago: Palmer House, 1973), p. 133.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid, p. 132.

<sup>51</sup>Wilder, *Early*, pp. 84-85. This is what Linnemann in *Jesus* calls "interlocking." There is a representation of the listener's point of view. Then the claim of the narrator is made. These interlock, creating the possibility of a new understanding, a change of existence, a new life.

<sup>52</sup>Funk, *Language*, p. 133.

<sup>53</sup>Wilder, *Parables*, p. 94. Shepperson in "Paradox" and Paul Deschenes and Martha L. Rogers in "A Systems View of Jesus Christ as Change Agent," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 9 (1981):128-135 have done an excellent job describing how Jesus used indirect communication strategies (e.g., reframing, reordering, reshaping the question) to effect change. He encounters people on the earthly level (first order) to affect them on a heavenly level (second order). Once a person makes the conceptual shift, he will receive the message of Jesus with joy. The Pharisees resisted because they felt they were already at the second level. "Change agents need to emulate Christ in their dealings with people. Christ is the ultimate change agent and left us 2000 years ago a clear example as to how change is possible" (p. 134).



Yet the Pharisees responded, "That's not how it is."<sup>54</sup> There are two possible responses: "Crucify him; this man is blaspheming God." Or "Truly this is the Son of God."<sup>55</sup>

The parable demands a decision. The hearer will be affected to the core and cannot remain the same because of his acceptance or rejection.<sup>56</sup> Crossan states:

The parables of Jesus are not historical allegories telling how God acts with mankind; neither are they moral example stories telling us how to act before God and towards one another. They are stories which shatter the deep structure of our accepted world. . . . They make us vulnerable to God. It is only in such experiences that God can touch us, and only in such moments does the kingdom of God arrive. My own term for this relationship is transcendence.<sup>57</sup>

It is necessary to gain intellectual insight into the New Testament events as they happened in the past in order to justify one's faith with full knowledge of the facts. It is also necessary to bring the parables to bear on one's life today.<sup>58</sup> The parable then engages the individual existentially at an intuitive level, bringing the hearer into an experience of the kingdom itself.<sup>59</sup>

Good preaching has communicated the proper exegesis of parables for thousands of years by thousands of preachers. Endless data have been tediously and competently gathered by scholars. Yet much of this information, as it leaves the pulpit, rarely affects the lives of those in the pew. Much of this exegesis would better serve the church by remaining in the notebook.<sup>60</sup> The preacher must fuse together scholarly integrity, New Testament truth, and existential concern so that the message Jesus intended for the original audience can be a message communicated today. Most scholarship (imitated in the pulpit) reduces the parable to a proposition. This divorces the poetic form from the message and causes the dynamic to be lost.

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<sup>54</sup>Funk, "Phenomenology," p. 205.

<sup>55</sup>Linnemann, *Jesus*, p. 41.

<sup>56</sup>Jan Lambrecht, *Once More Astonished* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1983), p. 4.

<sup>57</sup>John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1975), pp. 121-122.

<sup>58</sup>Lambrecht, *Astonished*, p. 17.

<sup>59</sup>Alberts, "Perspectives":440.

<sup>60</sup>Mark Thomsen, "A Parabolic Theology for Preaching," *Dialog* 19 (1980): 201.

Parabolic preaching must break the traditional chains which systematic theology has placed around these homilectical ideas.<sup>61</sup>

When a parable is interpreted by propositions, the impact will be softened and the function will not be the same. It is like explaining a joke. The beauty of how it works is that you get it. The listener is hooked.<sup>62</sup> The original hearers had an immediate identification with the points of reference that caused them to catch the point—or be caught by it. The task today is to recapture the punch of the parables by finding similar points of reference in the modern setting.

In preaching, the parable must be permitted to be parable, allowing the metaphor to disturb the pew so that new life can be found. Jesus used this form as a vehicle to carry a life changing message. He used parable for more than pedagogical strategy. He used parable not merely to hold attention or because he needed a good illustration. The nature of the rhetorical form itself evoked the nature of the gospel by revealing the mysteries of life, demonstrating spiritual realities, and mediating Jesus' own faith.<sup>63</sup>

A problem arises because the parables are set in a different cultural background. Therefore, because the past has explained the parables propositionally, the atypical nature (the surprise, the punch line, the impact) is not felt. The analytical approach has robbed the parable of the very substance that makes it effective. In preaching, the audience needs that element restored.<sup>64</sup>

A second problem is that the language of the twentieth century has changed. The allusions (points of reference) no longer reach by themselves to today. Although the parables of Jesus have been passed down, the language event has not. The pulpit must find a way to repeat the same language event. The parable should once again puzzle, provoke, and surprise so that decision will occur. Historically, how did the language event affect the original hearers? What were the points of reference that touched their lives? Imitate that event through Christian preaching. When the word of God comes alive, the change of existence is possible. One moves from unbelief to faith.<sup>65</sup>

How can the modern preacher create the same awareness of the direct and personal message of Jesus' original parable? Jesus accomplished this task

<sup>61</sup>Ibid, 202-203.

<sup>62</sup>Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), p. 126.

<sup>63</sup>Wilder, *Parables*, p. 71.

<sup>64</sup>Norman A. Huffman, "Atypical Features in the Parables of Jesus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97(1978):220.

<sup>65</sup>Linnemann, *Jesus*, p. 33.



by allowing the audience to overhear his story. There was recognition that the story was about someone else and not directly addressed to the hearer, so he listens. Once he is inside the story, the door closes. The door closes not by direct application, but by identification.<sup>66</sup> The point of entry into the story is crucial. One must enter through the right angle. With whom did the original audience identify? This is the intended perspective. As the original audience heard, so must we hear. The sinners, the disciples, and the enemies all heard different points, due to the different personal contexts in which they encountered Jesus. What are the personal contexts of today's audience?

The sermon today will often imitate the wide variety of Biblical forms so that people will respond.<sup>67</sup> The vehicle (the genre, the form) is important. I would much rather drive a Mercedes than a Yugo. Yet the man of the twenty-fifth century might not realize the difference. Once the difference is explained, the opportunity to strike is over. The pulpit needs to imitate the form of parable so that the effect is not lost in translation. A dynamic equivalent for today is needed to remove the cultural barrier so that the original dynamic is felt.

Should a new contemporary parable be created in the image of the old? It is wiser to stay with the original at some point during the sermon, even if explanation is needed. Jesus spoke with authority because of his life, death, and resurrection. Today, the preacher can only witness to that authority.<sup>68</sup> Yet there is great latitude to the homilectical craft that gives ample opportunity to seek a dynamic equivalent. Properly understood, parables will be as demanding, threatening, rebuking, encouraging, and promising today as they were then.<sup>69</sup>

*An Example: Matthew 20:1-16*

The first step with any parable is to ask two questions relating to plot and theme. Plot: How will this turn out? This is the discovery of the development of the story. Theme: What is the point that Jesus intended, and how did it impact the first audience?

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<sup>66</sup>Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 176.

<sup>67</sup>Thomassen, "Parabolic," p. 201.

<sup>68</sup>Schweizer, "Preaching," p. 252.

<sup>69</sup>One final thought about preaching parables. There is an urgent need today to respect the silence of parables. What is the intentional silence? Is the silence coincidental? Is the silence significant? If exposition leads to making points that come from silence, then the preacher needs to revise his exegetical methodology.

Next, the background of the parable needs to be investigated.<sup>70</sup> Dodd and Jeremias redirect the parable to a different audience. They believe the parable was originally addressed by Jesus to the Pharisees.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, the parable is addressing the theme of Jesus' acceptance of sinners and the opposition he felt because of this. This approach states that the early church as reflected in Matthew related this parable to Peter's question so that it would be applicable to the church of his day. The original audience can be discovered by seeing the context as given by Mark and compared to Luke. Jeremias desires to remove the influence of the church (i.e., Matthew),<sup>72</sup> This is creating a context in which the exegete decides where the story best fits, as opposed to Matthew's opinion.<sup>73</sup> Via also rips the parable out of context to maintain the autonomy of the art form.<sup>74</sup> He then concludes that it is an attack on any legalistic-merit system found in any age.<sup>75</sup>

In the context of the passage this parable follows on the heels of the question of Peter in 19:27. The disciples were expecting something special because they were the ones who were following Jesus first. They wanted reward for their sacrifices. Matthew also follows the parable with the request of James and John's mother in 20:20-28. This does not exclude Pharisees or the crowds in the audience, for the rich young man is mentioned in 19:16 and little children in 19:13.

This section of Matthew 19:1-30 and 20:17-34 does parallel Mark 10:1-52. Matthew inserts this parable at Mark 10:31 (Matt. 19:30) and concludes with the repetition of the saying in Matthew 20:16, only in the reverse order.<sup>76</sup> Matthew, therefore, makes a unique point concerning the twelve.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>70</sup>For Matthew 20:1-16 these studies need to be consulted: J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Workers in the Vineyard: A Parable of Jesus," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 25 (1974):64-91. Philip Culbertson, "Reclaiming the Matthean Vineyard Parables," *Encounter* 49 (1988):257-283.

<sup>71</sup>R. E. Brown, "Parables of Jesus," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), p. 987.

<sup>72</sup>Jeremias, *Parables*, pp. 29-31.

<sup>73</sup>This is seen in Dodd, *Parables*, p. 95. This is done in spite of his own warning against such in his introduction, p. 15.

<sup>74</sup>Via, *Parables*, pp. 149-151.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid, p. 148.

<sup>76</sup>Fee, *How to*, p. 114.

<sup>77</sup>There are ten kingdom parables in Matthew that use the introductory formula "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." This is better understood as "The kingdom of heaven is like the case of . . ." The object of comparison is the whole situation. Brown, *New Catholic*, p. 287.



The value of literary criticism is seen in Robert Funk's work which is summarized here.<sup>78</sup> The parable is introduced with a phrase of temporal sequence: "A landowner who went out early in the morning." What follows in verses 1-7 is the opening and the development. Then in verse 8 another phrase of temporal sequence occurs: "When evening came," which introduces the crisis-denouement.

In Act 1 (vss. 1-7) there are five scenes where the repeated phrases show the development. When the phrase order differs, it invites renewed attention and shows that significant development of the story has taken place.

Scene i:

- a. Went out to hire workers.
- b. Agreed for a denarius a day.
- c. Sent the workers into the vineyard.

Scene ii:

- a. Went out to hire workers.
- c. Sent them into the vineyard.
- b. Agreed to pay what was right.

Scenes iii and iv:

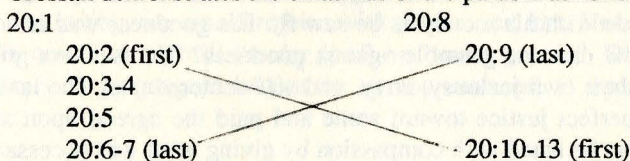
Did the same.

Scene v:

- a. Expanded.
- b. Omitted.
- c. Repeated.<sup>79</sup>

In Act 2 there are verbal relationships with Act 1. Here are five relationships with the Act 1 term given first: *dikion-adiko*, *denarius-denarius*, *hupagete-hupage*, *apodidomi-didomi*, *protoi-eschatoi*.<sup>80</sup> The assonance and euphony of this parable are common in Greek rhetoric.<sup>81</sup>

Crossan demonstrates the chiasmus of the parable as follows: <sup>82</sup>



<sup>78</sup>Funk, "The Narrative," pp. 43-50.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid, p. 46.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid, p. 47.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid, pp. 48-49, gives several examples of assonance and euphony in Greek literature.

<sup>82</sup>Crossan, "The Servant," p. 104.

The landowner's actions are not explained in order to keep the listeners listening. The fairness of this man is recognized by the audience. He states that he will pay whatever is right to the second group. Most would think this means a fair fraction of the original amount. Hiring the last workers for one hour was not common practice. He hired them because of their plight rather than their usefulness. The scenes between the first group and the last are needed so that the story would not seem improbable. This leads the audience along by degrees until the crisis-denouement.

The tension between the full-day workers and the landowner develops even before it is explicitly stated. There would be wonder by the audience at the payment in verse 9 of a denarius to the last workers. The first workers must have felt a sense of joyous anticipation. That feeling is quickly replaced by shock. They see this as a threat to their understanding of fairness. They wanted an application of the merit system (equality of exchange). Reward should be exactly proportionate to achievement. They felt they deserved the reward. They did not think the landowner should be stingy with the others but that they who had endured the heat of the whole day should be given a bonus.

The system of equality of exchange operates today. The one who works shorter hours gets less pay. The one who works longer hours gets overtime. If one hour is equal to one denarius, then twelve hours is equal to twelve denarii. The first hired were angry and rightfully so. What seemed to be generous is now arbitrary. How can one hour of easy work be equal to twelve hours of hard, hot work? Where is the justice for the conscientious, the faithful, the hard working? Where are consistency and dependability if rewards are issued arbitrarily? How will the master respond? Surely, he will see and do right. If he responds with generosity to the first workers, what could be a better way of illustrating God's gracious generosity?<sup>83</sup>

The landowner's response was clear and firm. He acted justly. He had the right to do with his money as he saw fit. His goodness was at no one's expense. How can one grumble against goodness? The workers grumbled because of their own jealousy, envy, and self-centeredness. The landowner acted with perfect justice toward some and paid the agreed upon amount. Toward others he acted with compassion by giving what was necessary for a family's daily needs.<sup>84</sup> Grumbling occurs only when one compares blessings. If one focuses on God's blessings and not on what the neighbor gets (keeping records for God), then there is rejoicing over the generosity of the owner.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Nelson, "Matthew," pp. 283-287.

<sup>84</sup>Strelan, "Sermon," p. 19.

<sup>85</sup>Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father*, trans. John W. Doberstein (James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1959), pp. 122-124.



The legalistic understanding of existence by the full-day workers caused them to be expelled with the words "Take your pay and go." They ended up being estranged from the source of grace. God does not behave in expected ways. He does not deal with men by the principles of equality of exchange (eye for an eye), but by grace. If he did, who then could be saved? As long as we insist on the equality of exchange, we will not be able to accept grace. This is what the kingdom is like.

The parable does not give a conclusion. Did the workers take their denarius and go home mad? Or did they repent? Matthew then adds the maxim "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." This statement is not intended to talk about order of salvation, the rank of disciples, or the reversal of that rank. The parable gives meaning to the phrase and is proverbial for the equality of God's grace given to all without partiality. At this time the disciples needed to hear this message. They, too, reflected the merit system. They wanted to push aside the children in 19:13ff. They did not comprehend the interaction between the rich young man and Jesus. They wanted to sit at the right and left of Jesus in 20:20ff. Yes, the Pharisees do have problems with Jesus accepting sinners (11:10). Those mentioned in 19:13-15; 20:29-34; 21:14-16; and 21:28-32 are all in the kingdom due to compassion. The Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus for this type of parable (21:45-46). Yet it is the disciples in this case who have problems accepting God's rationale for grace. They are hard pressed to accept a grace that would require Jesus' death (20:17-19).

When this parable is preached, there will be many in the pew who reflect the attitudes of the full-day workers. Through an inductive process, they need to identify with these workers. Who are the one-hour workers in our lives? Who are the twelve-hour workers? When a comparison is made to God's goodness, our lack of perfect goodness is offended. If we were truly good and loving, we would rejoice with those hired last. How legalistic are we? Is our thinking still "under law" or "under grace"? This shock, this offense, is the language event that the sermon must seek to repeat.