# ntroduction to the Parables

VERY EARLY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH outsiders saw Christians drawing their faith from parables. One of these witnesses was Galen, the most famous medical doctor of the second century. He was also the first pagan to say positive things about Christians. Around A.D. 140 he wrote:

> Most people are unable to follow a demonstrative argument consecutively; hence they need parables, and benefit from them . . . just as now we see the people called Christians drawing their faith from parables [and miracles] and yet sometimes acting in the same way [as those who philosophize] . . . and in their keen pursuit of justice, have attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.[1]

In later centuries parables became a source for Christian *life* (ethics) but not Christian *faith* (theology). It is instructive to note that in the second century Galen saw Christians building their *faith* on parables. How did parables lose their status as a source of the Christian faith?

Today, Jesus is naturally seen by Christians as the Son of God and Savior of the world. The New Testament also presents him as the perfect example of love and an effective storyteller for simple folk. But have we thought of him as a serious *theologian*?

Jesus was a *metaphorical* theologian. That is, his primary method of creating meaning was through metaphor, simile, parable and dramatic action rather than through logic and reasoning. He created meaning like a dramatist and a poet rather than like a philosopher.

## THEOLOGY: CONCEPTUAL AND METAPHORICAL

In the Western tradition serious theology has almost always been constructed from ideas held together by logic. In such a world the more intelligent the theo-

[1]This is from Galen's lost summary of Plato's *Republic*, preserved in Arabic quotations. The above text is quoted from James Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1957), p. 133.

logian, the more abstract he or she usually becomes, and the more difficult it is for the average person to understand what is being said. Paul works with ideas *and* metaphors. In the West we have tended to emphasis his concepts and sideline his metaphors. By so doing we have made him fit into our world of conceptual theologians.

In contrast, the popular perception of Jesus is that of a village rustic creating folktales for fishermen and farmers. But when examined with care, his parables are serious theology, and Jesus emerges as an astute theologian. He is, as noted, primarily a *metaphorical* rather than a *conceptual* theologian.

What precisely is a metaphorical theologian? Consider the following. We know that God is Spirit and is neither male nor female. Yet in the Scriptures we are told that the believer is "born of God" (1 Jn 3:9). Here John uses female language to describe the relationship between God and believers. Similarly, when Jesus addressed God as "Father," he used a male metaphor/title to help us understand the nature of God. Scripture uses male and female images to enrich our understanding of God, who is Spirit and thereby beyond male and female.

A metaphor communicates in ways that rational arguments cannot. Pictures easily trump but do not replace abstract reasoning. A powerful television image communicates meaning that a thousand words cannot express. When used in theology to create meaning, the parable challenges the listener in ways that abstract statements of truth cannot approach. Yet the two are often linked, and both are critical to the task of theology.

Theologians often use "illustrations" to infuse energy and clarification into their abstract reflections. Illustrations are frequently "the sugar-coating on the theological pill," as T. W. Manson so aptly stated.[2] A metaphor, however, is *not* an illustration of an idea; it is a mode of theological discourse. The metaphor does more than explain meaning, it creates meaning. *A parable is an extended metaphor* and as such it is *not a delivery system for an idea* but a house in which the reader/listener is invited to take up residence.

The listener/reader of the parable is encouraged to examine the human predicament through the worldview created by the parable. The casing is all that remains after a shell is fired. Its only purpose is to drive the shell in the direction of the target. It is easy to think of a parable in the same way and understand it as a good way to "launch" an idea. Once the idea is "on its way" the parable can be discarded. But this is not so. If the parable is a house in which the listener/reader is invited

[2] T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (1937; reprint, London: SCM, 1964), p. 73.



to take up residence, then that person is urged by the parable to look on the world through the windows of that residence. Such is the reality of the parables created by Jesus of Nazareth, a reality that causes a special problem.

If theology is built on logic and reasoning, then all one needs to understand that theology is a clear mind and a will to work hard. But if, for Jesus, stories and dramatic actions are the language of theology, then the culture of the storyteller is crucial. Our task includes the responsibility of trying to understand the metaphors and stories from and about Jesus in the light of the culture of which he was a part.

## UNLOCKING METAPHORS

To unlock the secrets of these metaphors, there are a few simple yet far-reaching challenges.

The first is to realize the importance of the task. It is easy to ignore historical questions. Granted, anyone can read the Bible and be blessed by that reading, just as anyone can listen to a Bach cantata and be moved. But at the same time, the trained ear will hear more and be moved on a deeper level by the same music.

One ploy often used to escape the hard work of attempting to discover what Jesus was saying to his audience is to affirm the "universal appeal" of his parables. Every culture has loving fathers, rebellious sons and self-righteous older brothers, and many, directly or indirectly, assume that the parable of the prodigal son needs no special cultural glasses. It is universal in its appeal. Up to a point this is true. But in the Middle East when a young man asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive his request means, "Dad, why don't you drop dead." The father is expected to get angry, slap the boy across the face and drive him out of the house. None of these things happens in the parable. By the time we process the significance of these three bits of cultural insight, the parable exhibits new meanings that otherwise would be missed.

The second challenge is to realize the historical nature of the Word of God. The Bible for Christians is not *just* the Word of God. Rather, it is the Word of God spoken through people in history. Those people and that history cannot be ignored without missing the speaker or writer's intentions and creating our own substitutes for them. Historical interpretation is the key to unlocking the vault that contains the gold of theological meaning. Without that key the gold turns to brass. It is helpful to note that this is true of all significant literature.

How is President Lincoln's Gettysburg address to be understood today? That speech was a turning point in American history because of the meaning it created in the middle of an identity-forming Civil War ("War Between the States"? or

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"The Great Rebellion"? or perhaps "The War of Northern Aggression"?). Each American brings his or her own history and experience to a study of that war. In spite of that, anyone who ignores the context of the war and the battle of Gettysburg cannot understand Lincoln's speech. In like manner, it is critical to interpret the parables of Jesus within his own world. Only then can we grasp the meaning created by them. The question becomes, How much meaning?

The third challenge is to distinguish what meaning or meanings can be attributed legitimately to the parables. For many centuries allegory reigned supreme as a method of interpretation, and the fatted calf in the parable of the prodigal son became a symbol for Christ because the calf was killed. Through allegory, interpreters were able to locate their favorite ideas almost anywhere, and confusion and finally meaninglessness conquered. This is probably why parables ceased to be sources for Christian faith and were limited to ethics. The Latin proverb reads, "Theologia parabolica non est theologia argumentativa."[3]

In reaction to the fanciful exaggerations that the allegorical method produced in past centuries, across the twentieth century there was a stream of scholarship that argued for "one point per parable."[4] Others allowed for several themes in a parable. The purpose was to protect interpretation from adding meanings to the text that could not have occurred to Jesus or his audience. But if a parable is part of a larger worldview, and if it is "a house in which we are invited to take up residence," then the dweller in that house can look out on the world from different windows. The house has a variety of rooms. If the great parable of the prodigal son has "only one point," which shall we choose? Should the interpreter choose "the nature of the fatherhood of God," "an understanding of sin," "self-righteousness that rejects others," "the nature of true repentance," "joy in community" or "finding the lost"? All of these theological themes are undeniably present in the story and together form a whole that I have called "the theological cluster." Each part of that cluster is in creative relationship to the other parts. The meaning of each can only be understood fully within the cluster formed by the entire parable. The content of the cluster must be controlled and limited by what Jesus' original audience could have understood.

When the Pharisees sat together and reflected on what Jesus was talking about in a particular parable, what ideas were available to them? There may be one or more. The themes that comprise the theological cluster of a parable must grow out

[3]Martin Scharlemann, *Proclaiming the Parables* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1963), p. 30.
[4]For a detailed review of the history of Western interpretation of the parables see Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), pp. 29-167.



of the world in which the parable was told and first heard. But should such a principle be strictly applied?

A great work of art has a life of its own. The viewer of that art brings his or her own life and experience to the moment of encounter with the work. Michelangelo's statue of Moses leaps beyond the world of sixteenth-century Italy and becomes "the angry man of God." Yet there need to be limits to what can legitimately be found in a story. One of the island cultures of the Pacific glorifies the cleverness of the deceiver. People of that culture read the story of the passion of Jesus and the hero of the story becomes Judas. Jesus turns into the duped fool. In the West some have found Marxism or Freudianism or Existentialism in the parables of Jesus. Postmodernism is selected by others as the appropriate lens through which to study the parables. Such interpretations could not have been imagined by Jesus or his audience. Additionally, whatever the interpreter finds in a parable needs to be evaluated in the light of the life and witness of Jesus. All fair-minded reviewers appropriately extend such a courtesy to any modern author. Can't the same courtesy be offered to Jesus? Such a discipline keeps one within the "critical realism" that N. T. Wright eloquently presents as a starting point for New Testament interpretation.[5]

## SUMMARY: INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLES

Finally, the question is not, Where are you on the ladder? but Did you get there by climbing or falling? All of us have limited intellectual and spiritual resources as we approach "the mind of Christ" in the parables. Each of us is aware of great interpreters who are so far ahead of us that they are nearly out of sight. Others known to us may not have had the opportunity to learn what we have learned. This perspective is shared by the greatest scholar and the simplest believer. All readers of Jesus' parables are challenged to do the best they can with what they have and not despair at the ignorance or achievements of others.

Simply stated, our task is to stand at the back of the audience around Jesus and listen to what he is saying to them. Only through that discipline can we discover what he is saying to any age, including our own. Authentic simplicity can be found the other side of complexity. The theological and ethical House of the Parables of Jesus awaits. May all enter with great expectations!

[5]N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1996), pp. 32-37, 61-64.