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Understanding the Parables of Jesus

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A major portion of the New Testament consists of the ministry and teaching of Jesus. All too frequently, however, evangelical pulpits have not reflected this. Part of the reason for this apparent neglect, no doubt, has been the lack of understanding the genre and literary forms used by the gospel writers.¹ Of these literary forms, some (*viz.* parables) require more intense study.² Since one-third of the Lord's teaching is

¹Much work has been done in recent decades to discover the significance both of the genres and the literary forms used by the gospel writers. For a comprehensive view of forms in the New Testament which are used in current scholarly discussions see James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992). While all scholars would not agree about the specifics of the gospel forms, a consensus seems to be forming that the gospels are a species of Greco-Roman biography called βίος. For additional information see David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) and Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Burridge provides extensive comparison and analysis of the Gospels with the Greco-Roman βίος (i.e., contemporary ancient biographies).

²William Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993): 336.

found in parables, an understanding of these parables is crucial to a better understanding of the Gospels.

In the present article, this writer endeavors to create a greater understanding of parables. First, an introduction to recent evangelical works on parables will be given. This will be followed by posing some of the problems associated with interpreting parables. The article will conclude with guidelines for interpreting parables. The subsequent articles of this issue of *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* provide examples of current parable interpretation.

Recent Evangelical Literature on Parables

The work of W. S. Kissinger did much to inform the student of issues and scholarly publications of parables prior to 1979.³ Craig Blomberg has recently written an essay that updates Kissinger's work, covering current trends in parable interpretation over the last fifteen years of study.⁴ This article is extensive in scope giving new publications, summaries of scholarly studies, questions which have been raised, and suggestions for further study. Together these two helpful works provide a basic understanding of where parable studies have been and where they are today and where they are going in the near future.

The writing of parable studies in the twentieth century was mostly from liberal scholars for six decades after the publication

³Warren S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press & A.T.L.A., 1979).

⁴Craig L Blomberg, "The Parables of Jesus: Current Trends and Needs in Research" in Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans, eds., *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 231-254.

of Adolph Jülicher's anti-allegorical approach to parables.⁵ In 1962, however, I. H. Marshall published a small pamphlet showing that allegory in parables was possible.⁶ This publication became trend-setting. Several significant works have been written from an evangelical viewpoint since then which are helpful in formulating a clearer understanding of how to interpret parables. Kenneth Bailey, a man who spent his life in the Middle East, has shown the literary form that parables often take, especially the use of parallelisms, chiasmic structure, and the importance of understanding Middle Eastern culture.⁷ In the early 1980s, three volumes were published. Simon Kistemaker and J. Dwight Pentecost discussed the parables in popular fashion while Robert H. Stein wrote a classroom text on methodology using select parables as illustrations.⁸

⁵Adolph Jülicher, *Die Gleichnis reden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Mohr, 1899); for a short summary of his views in English, s.v. "Parable" in *Encyclopedia Biblica*, 3563-6567. C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*; Joachim Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 1954; and Eta Linneman, *Jesus and the Parables*, 1961 are representatives of subsequent scholars who wrote through liberal 'lenses' between 1898-1960s.

⁶I. Howard Marshall, *Eschatology and the Parables*, 1963. This helpful work argued that the kingdom in Jesus' teaching had both a present and future aspect along with a present and imminent concept. He also argued that the parables are not the product of the early church, but of the disciples (i.e. apostles). By effectively challenging the liberal arguments of the previous sixty years, conservative voices began to be heard again.

⁷Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976) and *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980).

⁸Simon Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980) is a documented work making it helpful for further study. Although his covenant theology influences the discussion on the parables containing eschatological content, his insertion of first century cultural practices adds to its value. Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982) provides a popular, dispensational interpretation of parables. Unfortunately, its lack of documentation leaves the reader with little direction for further study. Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction*

In the most recent years several studies have made a significant contribution to the study of parables. In 1989, H. K. McArthur and R. M. Johnston published a collection of 125 parables from early rabbinical literature (the Tannaitic period, 50-220 C.E.).⁹ This collection is followed by ten essays in which they show the similarities with Jesus' parables and the Jewish setting of parables. David Wenham wrote a popular work reflecting a thorough awareness of the most recent scholarship. In addition to brief background studies of the parables, Wenham interprets the coming of God's kingdom as creating a spiritual revolution.

God was at last intervening, Jesus declared, to establish his reign over everything to bring salvation to his people and renewal and reconciliation to the world. But fortunately Jesus did not announce his message in such general theological terms; he announced it primarily through vivid, concrete parables.¹⁰

Craig A. Evans has produced a study of the enigmatic text "to see and not to perceive" in Isaiah 6:9-10, which is quoted in the synoptics in conjunction with parables. He interprets this as the purpose for Christ's speaking in parables. It is a significant

to the Parables (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) provides a survey of parable interpretation and discussions about parables which existed at that time.

⁹Harvey K. McArthur and Robert M. Johnston, *They also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990).

¹⁰David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 25. Wenham groups the parables into ten groupings, each depicting a different aspect of God's revolution. A thoughtful study of this work will bring stimulating and profitable results.

study for it includes not only all biblical uses of this passage, but also the extra-biblical occurrences of this text.¹¹

The most recent evangelical volume on parables has been written by Craig Blomberg and was published in 1990.¹² Blomberg, who has also written several important articles on the parables, has contributed significant work on the parables. He presents cogent arguments to debunk the liberal views prevalent since Jülicher. He demonstrates that parables often contain allegorical elements, and that they may have more than one point as to their central teaching. Moreover, he cautions that the use of allegory and allegorization of parables are not the same. Allegorizing the parables has its own history; it was this abuse that prompted Jülicher and others to reject allegory altogether. Nevertheless, by recognizing certain elements as allegorical (i.e. having meaning other than the obvious literal meaning), Blomberg has brought a perspective that is needed to allow the parables to "speak" from their first century context. Some parables are monadic (i.e. having one major character), dyadic (i.e. having two major characters), or triadic (i.e. having three major characters). Often there is a king, master, father figure and two other sets of figures, one good and the other bad.¹³ The monadic parables of course will not function this way. While more study and perhaps modification is needed in the methods suggested by Blomberg, it must be appreciated that the direction

¹¹Craig A. Evans, *To See and not Perceive*, JSOT Supplement Series 64 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989). He argues that Jesus taught in parables for the purpose of hardening the Jews, however, a question he does not answer is whether or not this hardening is in reference to the nation or to individuals.

¹²Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990). Both Blomberg and Wenham were students under I.H. Marshall and seem to reflect his influence in their works.

¹³Perhaps this is an application of the "two ways" motif (the right and wrong way in relation to God). This teaching is found in the Old Testament, New Testament, and the early Church Fathers. Examples can be seen in the well known parable of the soils, the two sons, and the ten virgins.

of recent evangelical studies is advancing the study of parables in a positive way.

Additional insight into the working of parables also may be found in recently published evangelical hermeneutic books as well as works which discuss the literary nature of parables.¹⁴ These publications along with those already mentioned provide a good view of the current status of parable studies from a conservative theological position.

Problems in Interpreting Parables

Along with the questions and solutions proposed by non-conservatives, evangelicals must arise to meet additional challenges that the parables pose in order for sound exegesis to take place. What follows is a list of some of the problems parables pose to the student.

Author's Perspective

Anyone who has studied the parables of Jesus is aware that the gospel writers frequently provide unique features of a given parable. In parallel accounts, it is evident that one writer may have modified the wording of a parable to adapt better the message to the initial reader, as well as to emphasize the

¹⁴For recent works on hermeneutics see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 235-251; Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), 194-226; and Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 336-340. For works discussing the Bible and parables as literature see Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1984), 139-153; Leland Ryken, *Words of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 61-76; John W. Sider, "The Parables" in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 422-435.

particular themes of the gospel writer.¹⁵ Upon approaching the biblical texts, therefore, one must remember that some parables may have been removed from their original setting by the Spirit-led authors.

Diversity of Application

Another problem faced by an interpreter of the parables is the apparent diversity of meanings given to a parable. This is especially important when the perceived understanding seems quite different. To resolve this issue, one must comprehend the nature of a parable. Is it simply an "earthly story with a heavenly meaning"? Or would a parable be better defined as a narrative fiction which communicates its meaning through the main characters.¹⁶ This writer supports the latter, for by identifying with the main character which most resembles oneself, the hearer/reader is induced to apply the teaching of the parable concerning that character. For instance, among those who heard the parable of the Good Samaritan, some would obviously identify themselves with the priest and levite who showed no love (*viz.* the lawyer who sought to justify himself).

Consequently, a diversified audience hearing the same parable could apprehend meaning for themselves without grasping all the meaning of the narrative. This is not to say that a parable can mean anything a reader desires. By focusing on the major characters of the parable and their interaction with each

¹⁵This can be illustrated in the Parable of the Soils. Luke's account of the "soils" differs from that of Mark and Matthew, thus emphasizing his theme and audience.

¹⁶John Sider, "The Parables" emphasizes that parables teach by analogy: "The common denominator of all the parables is not one rhetorical structure, not even any characteristic of content such as realism or kingdom theology, but a particular form of thought." He argues further that it is the important interplay between the imagery found in the story and the written text that must be understood.

other, rather than the details used to describe the background of the story, the extent of a parable's application is made clearer. Consequently, within every group of hearers, different responses occur. For instance, in the parable of the soils, each listener would not only hear the story of the four soil conditions and the diverse levels of fecundity, but they would be inclined to relate to the soil condition most similar to their life. This dynamic of the text allows the parables to function in a unique way; for they not only have appeal as stories to be remembered, but they challenge each hearer to relate personally to the message of the character who most directly relates to them. Subsequent hearings of the story can bring additional insights. Consequently different, but not contradictory, applications are possible from the same parable.

Intended Audience

Obviously, Jesus spoke parables to a mixed audience (i.e. disciples, crowds, followers, enemies). When written in a gospel form, however, the parables are for a believing audience living decades after the original setting. This requires seeing a parable in light of its original audience and then the recipients of the written gospel. In the parable of the soils (Matt 13; Mark 4; Luke 8), are we to understand the recipients to be the spiritually unproductive and productive listeners by the Sea of Galilee (i.e. saved or lost), types of responses to the word of the Kingdom in the early Church and the world, or both?

Cultural Customs

Since each parable was given in a first century context (i.e. background and historical setting of the text), it is essential to grasp the background of first century life and times, such as farming practices. By discovering, for instance, that the *terra rosa* (i.e. red soil of Palestine) in the area where Jesus was

teaching contained all four of the soil conditions found in the parable of the soils, it becomes obvious that the Lord used well known facts to challenge the minds of the listeners. Likewise, it is important to understand the content of the book in order to see where the author places the parable. Since the gospels are well structured accounts which focus on the person of Christ, each writer places the material in a place that is advantageous to his purpose for writing. Therefore, when examining a passage (i.e. pericope) such as a parable, a threefold view is needed. One must not only study the text itself, but also recognize the impact that the co-text of the whole gospel has upon it, especially the preceding and following pericopes. Of course the greater first century context becomes a crucial tool in grasping the big picture as well as specific practices found in the parables.

Kingdom Parables

Many parables, especially in Matthew, are introduced, "the kingdom of heaven is like" What is the nature of this kingdom?¹⁷ Most modern interpreters now acknowledge that the

¹⁷For an extensive survey of the Kingdom of God (KG) literature, see Wendel Willis, ed., *The Kingdom of God in 20th Century Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987). The essays in this work are not conservative, but they do identify 20th century discussion on the subject. Other works dealing with the Kingdom of God include the following: Andrew Sandlin, "The Amplification of the Kingdom Idea in Premillennial Thought," *Biblical Editor* (Spring 1990): 6-11; Martin Selman, "The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament," (part 1 and 2) *Tyndale Bulletin* 40 (1989): 161-183; Chrys Caragounis, "Kingdom of God, Son of Man and Jesus' Self Understanding," *Tyndale Bulletin* 40 (1989): 3-23 and 223-238; I. Howard Marshall, "New Hope of a New Age: The Kingdom of God in the New Testament," chap. in *Jesus the Savior* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 213-238; R.T. France, "The Church and the Kingdom of God: Some Hermeneutical Issues," in *Biblical Interpretations and the Church*, D.A. Carson, ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 30-44; Darrell Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," *ETS Papers 1987*, 1-16; Mark Bailey, "Dispensational Definitions of Kingdom,"

kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven are synonymous, with the latter expression found only in Matthew as a way to avoid mentioning the name 'God'. The point in question is whether or not this kingdom is present or future. While discussion continues in this area, it is becoming commonplace among many dispensationalists to view the kingdom as in an inaugurated, but invisible stage which will be consummated in the future with a visible reign of Christ in the earthly millennium fulfilling the promises made to Israel (Rev 20). Older dispensationalists see the kingdom as having a future, millennial inauguration. How the interpreter answers this question will determine whether a "kingdom" parable will have reference to the future alone or whether it concerns both believers today as well as those in the millennium.

Purpose of Parables

Why did Jesus choose the parable form as a means of communicating divine truth? As previously stated, rabbis used parables soon after the apostolic age and probably during the time of Christ. By using narrative stories, a message could gain entrance and be easily retained in the human mind even when prejudiced.¹⁸ Bailey shows how some parables are structured for

Post-ETS Papers 1988, 1-24 (This provides a good survey of dispensational views); G.N.H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 3 vols. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988); Alva McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959). In these books and articles are cited other works dealing with the Kingdom of God. Pertinent to dispensationalists are Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) and particularly Craig Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressing Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993).

¹⁸N. Levison, *The Parables: Their Background and Local Setting* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1926), xix.

ease of memorization.¹⁹ Parables demand thinking and a response: either acceptance or rejection. There is no neutral ground. The nature of the imagery in the narrative stimulated listening, providing a mental trap. A hearer would be drawn into the story, because it was intelligible and interesting, without immediately realizing its full significance. It was easy to identify with the positive and negative characters in the story. Those listeners not resisting the message received the spiritual seeds which were being planted to awaken religious perception. Among the common people who heard Jesus gladly, the occasion was an opportunity to more easily grasp the truth.

For the opponents of the Lord (i.e. those outside), however, parables were used to reveal spiritual dullness (Mark 4:10-12) and to make it impossible for them to repent in their present spiritual condition. The citation of Isaiah 6:9-10 by Jesus parallels its use by Isaiah against those who resisted God. Those of Jesus' day who opposed his teaching concerning the things of God and especially the kingdom were given clear warning of the consequences. Being spiritually dull they were incapable of spiritual turning even though they perceived that Jesus' teaching was directed against them (Mark 12:12). Did Jesus' teaching: 1) Prevent these "outsiders" from ever receiving the message from God as Israel had? 2) Bring a national condemnation by God after the manner of Isaiah with Israel? Or 3) Prevent these listeners from comprehending the message of the kingdom contained in these parables?²⁰ Both views two and three have

¹⁹Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 25-75.

²⁰The 'outsiders' showed the opposite response to the word from God that David had showed upon being confronted with his sin. When hearing the parable from Nathan the prophet, David acknowledged his sin and sought forgiveness (Psalm 51). It is not clear in the synoptic gospels whether the point is 1) Jesus spoke and the listeners who refused to hear were prohibited from spiritual life, 2) Jesus here condemned the nation of Israel for their refusal to respond to his message (although individuals could find salvation in Christ), or 3) that the "outsiders" are excluded from understanding these specific parables

merit.²¹ There were clearly times when parables were understood correctly by the outsiders as being directed to them (Matt 21:45-46). Each parable provoked listening and required a moral decision. The parable extended a call to a godly life and trust in God. Those who responded favorably were able to increase their understanding, but those who rejected Christ's teaching went no further.

Effect of Parables

What was the intended effect of the parables on the listeners? The original recipients included any or all of the following: the disciples, the masses, and the opponents of Jesus. To the disciples, Jesus spoke openly. When Jesus spoke of the tares, his disciples responded, "Explain to us the parable of the tares in the field." Jesus granted their request. There is no record, however, that Jesus continued to do this with all his parables. The disciples were later asked if they understood the other parables that Jesus had given, and they responded affirmatively (Matt 13:51). This is not to say they grasped the truth with complete clarity, since the parables gave a progressive understanding of God's truth as did his other teaching. Through parabolic teaching, the disciples learned not only about the kingdom, but also the kind of life its subjects must live. Proper belief was to influence correct behavior. They also could see that not all belonged in the kingdom.

The masses of people who heard Jesus speak had ample opportunity to respond favorably to his teaching. Upon hearing a parable, people could see their own inconsistency, because they

about the kingdom.

²¹The citation of Isaiah 6:9-10 in the synoptics is a problem in that Matthew 13:15 uses *μηποτε*, Luke 8:10 introduces a shortened form of the quotation with *ινα* and Mark 4:12 has *ινα*. For a thorough discussion of the problem see Evans, *To See and not Perceive*.

often were like the negative character. They were pressed to decide on which side of the story they desired to pursue. Unfortunately, they remained unchanged for the most part.

The critics (i.e. leaders of the religious and political community) had their lack of spiritual character revealed. Their response to Jesus' parables was consistently negative and ultimately led to his crucifixion.²² It does not appear that the parables were too difficult for the leading Jews (i.e. Pharisees and Sadducees) to comprehend; however, their animosity toward Jesus and his teaching kept them from seeing their real significance (*cf.* Isa 6:9-10). All received the mysteries of the kingdom (Matt 13:11f) in parabolic form. They were informational for the disciples, but judgmental for those outside. This hardening concept may be redactional (Mark, Luke) to show the long term effect of Jewish rejection; that is, a lack of spiritual understanding. Wenham effectively summarizes the effect of the parables and especially the meaning of Mark 4:12 and Matt 13:15:

1. Parables are designed and intended to teach people about the kingdom of God, *i.e.* to be an effective medium of communication.
2. But parables are not so simple and unambiguous that no one could mistake their meaning: in fact only some 'get' the meaning of parables (their interpretation); others do not.
3. This is the pattern of Jesus' ministry as a whole: some see and respond to the mystery of the kingdom revealed in Jesus, some are blind and refuse to do so.
4. The disciples' understanding of the mystery is not their own achievement, but the gift of God.

²²See Matt 21:45-46; 22:15-16; 26:3-4 and parallels in Mark and Luke.

5. Jesus' parabolic ministry therefore comes as God's gift to some and as his judgement to understanding of the mysteries of the kingdom of God - the kingdom brought and taught by Jesus - and so you receive interpretation of the parables to expand your understanding: to those outside these are parables only, so that they fail to see or hear the mystery of the kingdom, receiving instead the divine judgement spoken of by Isaiah.²³

Guidelines for Interpreting Parables

While the principles for interpreting the parables are similar to interpreting other portions of Scripture, the parables do require some additional steps. Listed below are some fundamental guidelines that, if followed, will help to insure that correct exegesis is taking place.

Grasping the Story

A proper starting point is understanding the *story* of the parable. This involves recognizing the major characters of the parable. As discussed earlier, there will be one, two, or three main character figures. When there is a three figure parable (e.g. Matt 13:24-30), a 'master' figure together with a positive and negative character will be present.²⁴ It is necessary to see how the characters are played off against one another. By learning the story and reconstructing it in your own words, the parable

²³Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 444.

²⁴These have been labeled monadic, dyadic, and triadic by Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*. At times there appear to be more than three, but there still are only three; for instance, in the parable of the soils (Matt 13:3-8), the three main figures are to be identified as the sower, the bad soil, and the good soil. Parables with two figures (i.e. dyadic) provide a contrast between two figures such as the Pharisee and the publican. One point stories have one figure, such as the parable of the leaven or the parable of the mustard seed.

can take on fresh meaning to the student. Since analogy or a comparison with something in the real world is intended, you must consider possible identifications for each figure.

Using the Greek Text

It is very helpful to do your study from the Greek, since parallels of expression, word plays, chiasmic structure and other literary devices such as metaphors can be discovered.²⁵ It appears that literary devices were often used in order to make memorization of the parables easy during the oral stage of the gospel parables. A study of key words can provide a meaning not readily seen in an English version of the Bible.

Studying the Context

Knowing the context (i.e. the non-textual setting from the first century such as the background, history, and customs) is invaluable, for they equip the reader to see the text from the viewpoint of the original recipients. W. Randolph Tate comments, "that meaning results from a conversation between the world of the text and the world of the reader, a conversation informed by the world of the author."²⁶ He identifies the three worlds of interpretation as that of the world of the author, the text, and the reader. "We argue, therefore, that the locus of meaning is not to be found exclusively in either world or in a marriage of any two of the worlds, but in the interplay between

²⁵Zuck indicates that exaggerations, hyperboles, reversals and atypical circumstances increase the impact of many of the parables; see Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 202; Ryken remarks the "end stress," [or] the last element in a parable is the most important, see Ryken, *How to Study the Bible as Literature*, 142.

²⁶W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), x.

all three worlds."²⁷ These wise words help to prevent the interpreter from bringing preconceived opinions into the interpretation process.

Studying the Co-text²⁸

It is essential to study the co-text of the parable, since parables are given a specific placement within the message of each gospel by the writer. Likewise it is important to consider the development of the book and where the parable is located in the overall message of the book.²⁹ Thus when studying the co-text of a parable it is important to discover what prompted the giving of the parable.³⁰

Relating the Parts to the Whole

After the textual, contextual, co-textual perspectives are clear in mind, it is time to work through the parable once more relating the parts to the whole. Keep in mind how the main characters are being portrayed and what they are saying. Each of them contributes a main point to the parable's total meaning.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸The co-text refers to the portion of the written text preceding and following any text being studied. Of specific interest are the relationships which exist between words, paragraphs, and sections of the gospel. It includes the whole message of the writing; see Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 10.

²⁹The idea suggested here is a good hermeneutical step that should be followed in the examination of any passage of Scripture. To study the text in its near co-text gives a micro view of a text's meaning. Looking at a text from the viewpoint of the whole book gives a macro view and the two approaches cannot contradict each other, if they are correct.

³⁰Zuck gives nine general occasions or purposes which prompted the giving of parables. This is not to say that his list is complete, but that different situations prompted the use of parables. See Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 211-215.

How do the details of the story contribute to a better understanding of the setting? While all details may not be pertinent in every parable, they should not be dismissed as irrelevant without due consideration. For instance, in the parable of the soils, there are three different unresponsive soil conditions. Jesus himself makes clear in his interpretation of the parable that each condition is different, but they all result in an unacceptable response to the word of the kingdom (Matt 13:19-22). The reason behind the rejection is different in each case. Only one other parable is explained by the Lord (i.e. the parable of the tares, Matt 13:37-51), and it too contains allegorical elements. One must therefore allow for the same possibility in other parables.³¹

The content that is not a part of the major characters is story material and caution must be taken not to seek meaning from every element of the story. For instance, in the parable of the prodigal son, the pigs, carob pods, far country, sandals, robe, and many other items do not have specific meanings. It is the action and inter-action of the father and his sons that contain the message.

Recognizing Irony in the Parables

Watch for the unusual in a parable, because it is often the salient point of the parable. Many times the final character does the unusual; that which was unexpected. This feature frequently identifies the purpose of the parable. In the parable of the

³¹Many commentaries and writings on parables have a strong anti-allegorical premise to them. For clear evidence that allegorical elements are present in parables, see Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 145-148; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 29-69; and Sider in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, 422-423. This does not sanction, however, the allegorization of the parables. Allegorical elements in a parable must be clear in the text and appropriate to the co-text.

wayward son (Luke 15:11-32), for example, the most unusual element of the parable is the wicked response of the 'good' son. Is it not possible that the strongest *punch* of the parable was for those who considered themselves good and would never do anything wrong to their father (heavenly Father)?

Discovering the Theme

No study of a parable would be complete without discovering the theme or central thrust of the parable. Here it is necessary to determine whether the parable is conveying an eschatological or an ethical emphasis. The lesson may be demonstrated from a positive example (i.e. what to do or portray) or from a negative example (i.e. what not to do). Next the point that each major character contributes to the parable should be stated in clear, concise language. What theological contribution does the parable make? While it is true that one should not derive theology from parables alone, parables do contribute to New Testament teaching. A word of caution is in order, however, for epistolary teaching should not be injected into the meaning of the parables. While they may supply teaching on the same theme as a parable, it would be difficult to prove that later revelation contains the same meaning as a parable. It is better to recognize that later teaching supports and even expands the message of the parables.

Applying the Parables

In addition to grasping the meaning of a parable for its original audience, it is imperative to discover the significance for the reader. Gospel content has relevance for all generations and it awaits both discovery and application to new situations which constantly arise. Prior to drawing a parable's significance for the church, "it is important to place its message first within the larger context of Jesus' teaching and then within the emphases of the

gospel within which it is found."³² For example, the relevance of the parable of the Good Samaritan must not remain a history lesson of the first century; nor is it an invitation for the church to become a social welfare institution. The message concerns a Samaritan, whose life displays admirable qualities which all neighbors should have. His actions were completely unexpected since Jews and Samaritans had little social contact with each other. It is a message to teach Christ's followers to be good neighbors, especially to those having need who appear different. This requires one to perceive what true neighborliness involves.

This parable is part of the unique teaching of Jesus. It is a message about attitudes and actions. A reader must recognize that it especially includes the treatment of those who are considered outcasts. By analyzing the responses of the priest, levite, and Samaritan, every believer can understand the correct action and must evaluate his own past responses in similar situations. There is currently a need for a genuine concern and a willingness to pay the price of being a good disciple. In this case, being a good follower of Jesus requires correct responses even in difficult situations. With many of the parables, a right understanding and application will be the opposite of common practice. This is the way it is in God's kingdom. A proper hearing of a parable will produce an internal spiritual revolution and will be followed by life-long conformity to Jesus' teaching. When applying parables to modern times, existing attitudes and solutions are tested by the teaching of Jesus and new situations encountered in life. What will the response be?

"Properly understood, the parables will be as demanding, threatening, rebuking, as well as encouraging and promising to us as they were to Jesus' hearers."³³ It is hoped that this article along with the three subsequent articles in this issue will help to open eyes to see and consequently, open mouths to proclaim the

³²Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 248.

³³Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 71.

wonderful and necessary teaching from the Master's parables to a Church in great need of guidelines for godly living.