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Source: *Direction*, vol. 10, no. 2 (April 1981): 26-28.

Published by: Direction.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/628>

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Interpreting the Parables: A Case Study

Elmer A. Martens

[The following is an abridged version of a case study prepared by Elmer A. Martens, President of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California. The case was designed to introduce students to the questions which arise from the attempt to interpret literary texts, in this case the meaning of a parable of Jesus. The full text, copyrighted by the Case-Study Institute is available (#9-480-720) from Intercollegiate Case Clearing House, Soldiers Field, Boston, Massachusetts, 02163.]

Professor Edwards, lecturer in New Testament, was interpreting the parable of the unrighteous steward (Luke 16) to a summer school class which included many church leaders from Asia and Africa. After an hour-long presentation of scholarly research, the students were dismissed for small group discussion. One of the discussion groups "come alive" when a bishop from India sketched a contrasting exposition of the parable. The participants were faced with the question in a new way: What does the parable mean? How does one arrive at the meaning?

The Exposition

Professor Edwards noted that Jesus' apparent approval of the steward's "dishonest" actions posed problems for interpreting the parable. The heart of his exposition consisted in the discussion of two scholars' views on the main point of the parable.

Kenneth Bailey, who lived in the Middle East for twenty years, has done much research on the everyday life of peasant societies. He sees the master in the parable as a large farmer rather than a money lender. The steward collected the tenants' rent in wheat and oil. Though the master had dismissed the steward from his position, the steward had not yet surrendered the records; and he acted quickly to reduce the tenants' contracts before they heard of his dismissal. Though this made him liable to court action, he counted on the master's goodness (and the master's reluctance to disenchant the tenants who were presumably praising his generosity?). Thus the parable stresses that the steward, like the prodigal son in the preceding chapter, knows that his "salvation" lies only in the mercy of his superior. The parable, which Bailey thinks ends with verse eight, teaches the heavenly Father's forbearance and grace.

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J. Duncan M. Derrett, who is professor of oriental law at the University of London, sees the parable in the light of the Jewish laws of agency and usury. He asserts that when a master commissioned a servant to act as his agent he was fully bound by the agent's action and would not have had recourse to civil court. The agent's work is that of extending loans of the master's money to creditors who pay in kind rather than currency. In lending practices Jews distinguished between the law of God and civic law. The steward, in lending money to Jews, was morally a transgressor but legally secure. When the steward rewrote the contracts eliminating the usury, he was bringing the contracts into alignment with the law of God. But according to the civic law the contracts remained legally valid, though the steward was depriving the master of monies due him. Still, the steward, by making amends, was acting righteously. The public would praise the master for his piety; and the master would accept the credit, even though it was not he who had initiated the move. In this reading the parable teaches the importance of obedience to the law of God.

The Discussion

After the lecture, the members of Group 4 convened as they had for the previous discussion sessions. No sooner had the group leader initiated discussion, than the participant from India, Bishop Malagar, spoke up.

You westerners are too analytical. You tear a parable apart and pull it to shreds. Why not look at the parable just as Jesus gave it — a story out of his cultural context. The background is oriental and fits Indian life also. Even today rich landlords living well in the city appoint a steward, a "daroga," to take care of their land and investments. These stewards contract with their masters for a given amount and then issue subcontracts to tenants. By inflating the subcontracts beyond the total promised to the master, the steward makes his "commission" or profit.

When the steward heard of his possible dismissal, he proceeded in a way that was legal and true to his character. The master no doubt got his share, but the steward himself forfeited some if not all of his commission. Yet he earned the goodwill and gratitude of the tenants who would later receive him. As Jesus says, "The children of this world are wiser than the children of light." Verses 9-13 are part of the parable and show that it is basically a lesson in the importance of prudence.

The other participants quickly responded. Nancy, who had lived for thirteen years in Zaire where her parents were missionaries, said, "I can understand the story given the third world setting. It's the natural way of working. I like the down-to-earth practical quality of the parables."

Tony, a seminary graduate with five years pastoral experience, also found this approach refreshing. It emphasized the "real-life" quality of Jesus' teachings. Perhaps Jesus was not so heavily ethical as he is usually portrayed.

Perhaps, he suggested, the scholar works too hard at an interpretation, and it is legitimate for a casual reader to follow a “seat of his pants” theology. Yet Tony admitted that he tilted toward Professor Edward’s scholarly approach. Bishop Malagar’s reading was more relevant to the Indian culture than to the American. “Is there validity in both approaches?” he asked.

The discussion period had rarely seemed so short. Nancy and Tony were not the only ones left curious about the meaning of the parable and how one best discovers the message of Christ’s parables.

Bibliography

Bailey, Kenneth E., *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1976).

Derrett, J. Duncan M., *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970).

A helpful discussion of methodology is found in the introductory chapter of Bailey’s book. He identifies historical, aesthetic, and existential approaches to parable interpretation. He regards his own method, which he describes as “oriental exegesis,” as a combination of the historical and aesthetic approaches. Other scholars such as C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1961), and J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (1963), have stressed the historical approach; G. V. Jones, *The Art and Truth of Parables* (1964), emphasizes the aesthetic; E. Linnamann, *Jesus of the Parables* (1966), is a historical and existential approach; and the book by Dan O. Via, *The Parables and Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (1967), has an existential and aesthetic emphasis.

Responses to the Case-Study

THE GRAMMAR OF INTERPRETATION

Through each parable Jesus intended to evoke some particular response to the new kingdom he was announcing. Our first task in each case is to understand *his* intention. For texts do not mean, only persons mean. Meanings do not exist independent of persons (or communities of persons). Our primary question, therefore, must be: What did Jesus intend to say? And if we can answer this question, we may put forth a second: How may we make this message “come alive” today?

A grammar useful in discerning intended meanings has been provided by the contemporary literary and rhetorical critic, Kenneth Burke, in his *A Grammar of Motives*. His grammar (Burke’s “dramatistic pentad”) consists of five components: “what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene),