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Parables of the Kingdom, The Parables of Grace, and The Parables of Judgment (Book Reviews)

Michael Williams
Dordt College

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come for evangelicals to plunder the well-burnished riches of the Enlightenment and the newer treasures of modernity to furnish a house of learning made with their own hands. (209)

Such an ideal holds little hope for a thorough engagement with history from the perspective of faith; to the contrary, the Enlightenment minimized history in favor

of scholastic metaphysics and contributed immensely to the separation of faith and scholarship. Noll's laudable attempt to integrate faith and scholarship still assumes disparate categories for history and the absolute, and thus demonstrates, even while struggling to overcome it, the "divided mentalities" (192) of the evangelical tradition.

The Parables of the Kingdom, by Robert Farrar Capon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1985. 174 pages, paper. \$12.95.
The Parables of Grace, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1988. 184 pages, paper. No price.
The Parables of Judgment, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1989. 181 pages, cloth. \$15.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Capon's expository trilogy brings us a treasure-trove of exegetical and theological reflection on the parables of Jesus. This fresh and provocative look at the Gospel parables reveals a very different Jesus than most of us are familiar with and a richer universe of meaning and discourse than most of our theological systems can appreciate.

The parables are like old shoes to many of us. You know where they are and how they fit and feel. We have become familiar, even content, with the parables and with our comfortable understandings of them. We read them unreflectively, thinking their meanings so plain and their message so facile that all we need do is stand in their proximity and they will imprint themselves upon us. In Capon's hands, however, the Lord's parables are anything but the flannel-graphed nuggets of wisdom and sage advice that our Sunday School teacher made them out to be. Many of the parables "are not agreeable; most are complex; and a good percentage of them produce more confusion than understanding." The teller of these sometimes perplexing stories "spoke in strange, bizarre, disturbing ways" (Kingdom, 1).

Why did Jesus prefer the obscure to the clear, the round-about to the straight ahead? Quite simply, because he was not what first-century Israel expected the Messiah to be, and he was not going to play to the popular messianic expectations. Jesus defied and broke down every plausibility structure of the first-century (and ours too). From beginning to end, he was not a sword-and-saddle Messiah, but a carpenter-and-cross Messiah. And it is all as dumbfounding today as it was in Herod's day. Jesus was rather un-messianic, by all standards but his own; and he was going to be the Messiah only by his own. He was dealing with people who thought they had all the answers. Jesus' one-liners and baffling stories, simply put, made mince-meat out of people's expectations. Capon's presentation allows the parables to shred ours as well.

Capon divides the parables into three sections. *The Parables of the Kingdom* cover the parables that occur in the Gospels prior to the feeding of the five thousand, thus before Matt.14, Mark 6, and Luke 9. *The Parables of Grace* cover the parables and parabolic activity between the feeding of the five thousand and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, thus ending at Matt.21, Mark 11, and Luke 19. *The Parables of Judgment* cover the parables between the triumphal entry and the events of the passion narrative.

In *The Parables of the Kingdom* Capon develops the idea that God uses left-handed rather than right-handed power. God does not run his creation by way of overt, direct demonstrations of his power and authority, but covertly, even surreptitiously. The key word throughout these parables seems to be *aphete* (translated variously as "forgive" "allow" or "let"). Where we would prefer judgment and absolute, unerring justice for the evildoer, the kingdom parables emphasize that God's judgment is usually withheld for the Day of the Lord. Over-against the standard Jewish messianic expectations of a militaristic, parochial, retributive, vengeful, coercive, demonstrably powerful king and kingdom, Jesus spoke of a catholic, mysterious, forgiving, hidden yet present kingdom which aggressively demands our response. This paradoxical kingdom says that apparent weakness is true strength. Yes, there is judgment and retribution, but those wait upon the Day of the Lord—as in the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13).

Where *The Parables of the Kingdom* focus on the paradoxical idea of strength in apparent weakness, *The Parables of Grace* are no less confounding. Here the fundamental theme is that Christ wins by losing. The linchpin of grace is that it comes from the cross, and only from the cross. The essence of the gospel is grace, not success; not achievement, but grace. God is interested more in grace than in judgment.

Not surprisingly, the final installment, *The Parables*

of Judgment, further explores the idea that God's judgment does not look anything like we expect or desire it to look like. The touchstones of divine judgment are not retribution and the lake of fire, but resurrection and pardon. Quite simply, God is not mad at the world; and his book-keeping reads "Jesus" on every line. God works his judgment by going out of the judgment business, by Jesus taking all enmity away on the cross.

As the reader may have surmised, a happy universalism informs Capon's analysis of the parables. Grace includes rather than excludes. While universalism has a long history in Episcopalian circles (Capon is an Episcopal priest), his articulation of the universalist idea follows a form that we are beginning to see quite

a bit of these days: every one is redeemed except those who consciously and deliberately deny Christ (*Judgment*, 12ff). Capon's Episcopalian roots also show themselves in his incarnational view of the church.

These problems, serious as they are, do not detract from the value of these books. Capon is an exciting thinker, and his style is unpredictable and engagingly conversational. He is far from perfect, sometimes less than fully orthodox, but never boring. There is always plenty to chew on, and most of it is nourishing. Pastors will especially appreciate the works. There must be at least a year's worth of preachable ideas about the parables here. Anyone who is interested in Scripture, and especially the parables, will be entertained and edified.

The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation, 2nd ed., by Jack P. Lewis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). 512 pages. Paperback. \$21.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

"And Jacob sod pottage; and Esau come from the field, and he was faint" (Gen. 25:29). What was Jacob doing? "Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing" (Ps. 5:6). So much for renting an apartment! "Solomon loved many strange women" (1 Kgs. 11:1). What were they, Republican welfare mothers? "We do you to wit of the grace of God" (2 Cor. 8:1). What? Say that again. In English this time.

Language changes. A reading of the King James Bible will quickly show today's reader that the English language is dynamic. Words have lives; they are born and then they die. Better yet, they are commodities. They come into use to communicate and are simply forgotten when they no longer fulfill that function. Sometimes they stick around, but with entirely different meanings. Witness the change in meaning the word *gay* has undergone in just the last two decades. While it retains its older denotation of "joyous" or "merry," its transformation into a predicate adjective referring to a male homosexual has all but assured that its former denotation will fall out of common use.

Lewis has no problem with the proposition that—as William Tyndale put it—the Bible should be made plain for the common man. His problem is with those who believe that the Bible should be locked up in archaic language, arcane idioms, and outdated constructions. There is a subtle polemic running throughout his fourteen extended reviews of English Bibles ranging from the King James Version of 1611 to the New Revised Standard of 1990. Positively stated, the thesis is that every translation or version of the Bible has more virtues than faults (8). Negatively, and here we see the polemic, he contends that modern translations are not

the fruit of gigantic conspiracies meant "to draw people into religious error." The confessional peculiarities and theological lunacies of Christendom are not caused by what translation people read, but rather by the fact they do not read at all (410).

Each chapter contains a comprehensive review about a given version. Lewis analyzes the accuracy of translation, discusses how well they communicate, the variety of renderings, the style, the textual base, the punctuation, format, approach to translation, theological stance, marginal notes, vocabulary, printing problems, disputed features, public reception of the version, and something of the story of how each came about in the first place. This is often done by use of long lists of comparisons, list that Lewis himself admits make for tedious reading (61), but they do make his case, as well as show the careful research behind his evaluations.

The book includes chapters on the King James Version, American Standard Version, Revised Standard Version, New English Bible, New American Standard Bible, Jerusalem Bible, New American Bible, the New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Living Bible, Good News Bible, New International Version, New King James Version, Revised English Bible, and New Revised Standard Version.

Besides criticizing the New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses (a thoroughly bizarre and "tendentious" translation), Lewis criticizes three other versions. That the Living Bible is a paraphrase of the ASV (1901) does not bother Lewis, for all translations resort to paraphrase at times. But Lewis thinks the Living Bible is a bad paraphrase, full of commentary and glosses, capricious renderings, and unwarranted theological in-