

Reading the Parables Theologically to Read them Missionally: Test Cases from the Early Galilean Parables in Luke's Gospel¹

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Introduction

The parables of Jesus provide fertile ground for wide-ranging reflection on missional readings of Scripture. Parables found in the Gospels are not only conducive to a missional hermeneutic,² but themselves are missionally oriented texts reflecting the entirety of Scripture's missional character. The present essay attempts to argue that the parables bear this character when their content is reconceptualised in a reciprocal relationship with the traditional theological *loci*. These theological categories themselves are best conceived missionally insofar as they cohere together in a manner that carries explanatory power. This power is something the parables possess innately

as part of their very nature as Scripture.

This article aims to take up the presentation of the early Galilean parables as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. From its prologue, the book is said to bear "an apologetic and evangelistic purpose," which throughout its discourse proposes "to present Jesus in such a way that any reader might accept him as Messiah, Lord and Saviour."³ In other words, Luke had a *missional* agenda. It will be argued that the scope of Luke's early parables displays not only the same missional thrust present in Jesus' ministry, displayed in the theological content of Jesus' parables, but also in the subsequent ministry for which Luke employs Jesus' parables for a similar purpose in his own writing. This aims to highlight both the expositional readiness of the parables and their missional fittingness for Luke's own catechetical intention integral to the discipleship process. The task of this article could conceivably be executed with parables appearing in the other Gospels, and elsewhere throughout Luke. Insofar

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Gospel and Our Culture Network's Forum on Missional Hermeneutics at the 2011 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Francisco, California. I am grateful to Professor Klyne Snodgrass for his engagement with its content.

2. For a discussion of recent efforts in developing missional hermeneutics, see George Hunsberger, "Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping a Conversation," *Missiology* 39/3 (July 2011): 309–21.

3. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 44.

as the same parables harnessed here by Luke for missional purposes appear in the other Gospels, those Gospels too may be deemed to have missional character. Yet the parables explored later in the present article are selected because they are the earliest ones in Luke and repeatedly show what the parables are meant to do, displaying a range of theological themes sufficient to highlight precisely how it is that a theological reading is tantamount to a missional reading of Scripture. As such, it is important to first give some background to the missional nature of Luke's gospel before moving toward a proposal for a missional reading of Scripture that is explicitly theological. My argument will then proceed with tested readings of the early Lukan parables which, through the readings, aim to highlight the corresponding missional and theological character of these parables. This will lead to the conclusion that it is a theological reading of Scripture that most adequately yields a missional reading of Scripture, which the selected exegetical observations in the final section of this essay bear out, thus highlighting the missional nature of these parables as Scripture.

Luke's Gospel as Missional Text

Because of the explicitly missional character of Luke's gospel as a formal account written to someone already "taught" (Luke 1:4) key features of the gospel message, the first reader is now having them explained in a better, more "orderly account"⁴ and "for

4. See NIV, NRSV. See also Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, which citing Martin Völkel, "Exegetische Erwägungen zum Verständnis des Begriffs im Lukanischen Prolog," *NTS* 20 (1974): 289–99, argues that "the word implies the continuity of items within a logical whole, so that Luke's aim is to show that the story of Jesus, taken as a whole, makes sense and is therefore worthy of belief."

[his] benefit" (Luke 1:3).⁵ In light of this discipleship thrust, Luke's own emphases in the parables becomes of particular interest for how Luke sees them individually and corporately reiterating this missional thrust, with its attendant theological features. Each of these theological notes would ring flat in isolation, yet in the parables are woven together in harmoniously coherent ways that take account of and showcase the range of the displayed theological ensemble, which aims to send readers out in mission.

Jesus' intention for speaking in parables in the early Galilean context—"so that, 'though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand'" (Luke 8:10)—corresponds directly to an understanding of mission most readily aided by knowledge of the progressive development of theology's essential contours as they have been conceived traditionally and manifested in faithful confession and proclamation.⁶ This suggests that readings

5. J. Reiling and J. L. Swellengrebel, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Luke* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 11.

6. For an account of how theology was shaped systematically throughout its historical setting, see Colin Gunton, "Historical and Systematic Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3–11. See also John Webster, "Confession and Confessions," in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 119–131. For an excellent treatment on early Christian confessions and how these relate to contextualization, see Richard N. Longenecker, *New Wine Into Fresh Wineskins: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999). For an alternate reading of early creeds or confessions as largely unconcerned with contextualization, see Carl Trueman, *The Creational Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 154–156.

capable of integrating the systematic *loci* as traditionally developed and framed in various contexts with emergent systematic-categorical language can substantially assist the exegesis of the parables with thickly endowed theological description that has the capacity to assist contemporary interpreters in understanding these texts as *missional*.

Luke's portrayal of Jesus' early Galilean ministry finds Jesus proclaiming and recounting in parabolic fashion the "good news of the kingdom" in "secrets of the kingdom." These secretive or veiled expositions are not unique to Jesus, but are similarly veiled in various ways with every other gospel exposition and confession representative of the economic activity of God in Christ, including close accounts of this action.⁷ Even in the closest of accounts (i.e., documents written under divine inspiration), there are no exhaustive renderings of this gospel. Such would be impossible, displacing theology's real-world shape as *theologia viatorum* with a misplaced *theologia beatorum*, as if present day theological constructs themselves somehow form the basis of believing confession.

A coherent relationship must surely exist then between the development of the kerygmatic gospel in the world, and the very gospel proclamation of the kingdom, about which not everyone has ears to hear. This seems to be something not only true for the parables, but for all gospel proclamation. In the first century setting, this

7. It has been noted that the missionary character of Jesus' ministry is disclosed in his ministry's central feature, the "reign of God" in its already/not yet tension, the reality of which provides the "creative tension that the reality of God's reign has significance for our contemporary mission" (David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991], 31–32).

proclamation⁸ struck as scandal for the Jews and foolishness for Gentiles. But "blessed" were those not "offended" by Jesus and the explanation of his proclamation of "good news," which was accompanied by mighty acts (Luke 7:23). All proclamation of God's good news may be understood as having been pneumatically governed expositions of the same gospel that had always been articulated, canonically expounded in Israel's history and confession of its hope in Yahweh and Yahweh's Messiah, later inscribed authoritatively in the New Testament's expositions of this story, and persistently expressed in later ecclesial situations. These may very well be claimed today to have been organically connected, pneumatically shaped and governed by rational structures that mark what it means to lisp after and by doing so to reflect by mimesis the same gospel Jesus makes reference to and expounds in his parables. The test of these expositions for having missional character has to do with whether they cohere with the features of parabolic kingdom proclamation as both testified to, understood, and experienced in ways that correlate with their theological comprehensibility as rendered when woven through the systematic theological categories. The scope of this test is the shape that confession most naturally takes while articulating its treasures, which is arguably the manner in which the gospel has always been proclaimed by the church, as expressed in the ancient and contemporary creeds and confessions, and in every other endeavor to expound its inexhaustible riches.

8. Specifically, this is the proclamation of "the cross" or the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:23). Although the cross cannot be conceived as an isolated category—it only makes sense with all the categories of theology coming to intersect with it as it sheds particular light on all the others.

Suggested Meaning of a “Theological” Reading as a “Missional” Reading

The argument of this essay works with the tentative conclusion that core themes that appear later in creedal and confessional statements are those which also can be found earlier in the parables. These themes seem resident in various collected testimonia, various other gospel expositions found in the New Testament texts, as well as elsewhere throughout the Old Testament.⁹ These themes also appear in present-day gospel articulations in their most sophisticated and rigorous accounts as well as in those of the illiterate or of society’s marginalized members, reflecting something of an archetypal gospel that radiates the divine action in the salvation economy wherever the Spirit wills. This divine action, taken as singular, is not then “repeated in a multitude of different ways”¹⁰ as much as it is faithfully “resounded” through the creative yet subjective sketchings of redeemed humans in various settings, in different languages, and by different peoples in many ways.¹¹

9. For a brief discussion of how the “gospel” as “the message of God’s comprehensively restorative kingdom” relates to the Synoptic Gospels, the apostolic witness, and the Old Testament, see Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 3–17.

10. Walter C. Hobbs, “Indicators of a Missional Church,” in *Treasure in Clay Jars*, ed. Lois Y. Barrett et al. (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 2004), 162.

11. This attempts to appropriate Webster’s logic when he asserts: “The Holy Trinity is the ontological principle (*principium esendi*) of Christian theology; its external or objective cognitive principle (*principium cognoscendi externum*) is the Word of God

In the case of the parables found in the Gospels, the subjective exposition in the very making of them is seen to be given by the one who is equally human and divine.. But it was systematic nonetheless. These systematic reflections of the good news are observed further from reading Scripture in its entirety in order to make sense of faith in the God of Scripture whom believers confess, which led these believers into further readings and confessions of scriptural truth that enabled them to yield further resoundings of the gospel’s systematic range.¹² This does not preclude any epistemic privilege beyond Scripture’s text, but rather acknowledges the biblical witness as the very “interim terminus of systematic theological intelligence.”¹³

Systematic theology is missional insofar as it renders a coherent exposition of the gospel message, expounded consistently with what is revealed to be true about the divine working in the salvation economy, the core of which is summarized in all faithful confessing, of which Scripture is an indelible part. Theological categories, then, expressed in various con-

presented through the embassy of the prophets and apostles; its internal or subjective cognitive principle (*principium cognoscendi internum*) is the redeemed intelligence of the saints” (John Webster, “Principles of Systematic Theology,” *IJST* 11/1 [2009]: 58).

12. While noting the particular importance of the Old Testament for Christian mission, Richard Bauckham argues that without the “thematic trajectories” of the Old Testament, “we could not understand the universal direction and goal that are everywhere apparent in the New Testament writings,” because “[t]he movement of God’s purpose always starts from the particular on its way to the universal” (*Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 47).

13. Webster, “Principles of Systematic Theology,” 70.

fessions and interlocked as they inform one another at each turn, are missional in character and emphasis as they testify to the one gospel which they reflect in sometimes mundane, sometimes simple, and sometimes complex renderings. At the most basic level, this relates not to dogmatics, but to confession, which is the fundamental shape the gospel takes in its real-time expositions, which lie at the heart of Christian mission today.¹⁴ Under consideration in the present article, however, is the way Jesus' parables yield, while reciprocally being complemented and fortified by, the systematic categories that frame, are structured by, and avail themselves further unto the missionary impulse, advancing even into today's missionary task. Additionally, expositions of a divinely authored archetypal gospel, its own shape and subsequent articulations reflecting God as missionary, display the reality of the triune missions, and the "missioning after" God's action which is the journey the church willingly conforms. The church moves to this impulse in a rhythmic mimesis consistent with the shape of God's world, the various realities of which Jesus discloses in the parables.

There is therefore a *theological context* for reading the parables, which more deeply highlights their nature as Scripture. This context transcends their historical

14. For the importance of official ecclesiological acceptance for dogmatics, which, in its fluidity, systematic theology per se seems resistant to, see Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology," 57; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 210–214, and Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 18–40. See also the claim that systematic theology is a kind of dogmatics that is "epistemologically self-aware" (Gunton, "Historical and Systematic Theology," 18).

settings, affirming their subject matter as categorically ranging from the theological *loci* of, on one hand, theology proper, and on the other, eschatology. Yet this context recognizes the essential relationship with and considerable need for development through conversation with all theological categories *en route* to the hermeneutic that can be designated as properly and coherently missional, which will then yield cultivated readings that possess inherent explanatory power leading to further gospel proclamation and discipleship in the world.

The parables then, as all Scripture, should be approached *a priori* confessionally. This approach illuminates the various contours and manifold dimensions of the parables, along with their missional shape and character. Of course, not everyone understands the gospel message in such a way that they might themselves reflect the truest impulses of the gospel truth enfolded therein. As in Jesus' day, not all confess the gospel today, which is the tragedy of unbelief. But neither does this halt the further expositions of the kind of systematic theological resoundings that Jesus himself gives in the presence of an audience said to be deaf, without hearing ears. This invites contemporary readers to pursue a *theological* reading of the particular parables under investigation, which are the first ones that Luke's earliest reader(s) would have encountered, and which seem to bear significant weight insofar as they and the Gospel of Luke itself was written to have a missional impact. In this manner, a properly "missional" reading ought to provide an exposition that consciously highlights systematic theology's tools and the church's confessional resources in order to showcase how these resourcefully highlight the missional grain of these texts, thereby yielding further missional effects.

Reading the Early Lukan Parables Theologically

While reading the parables theologically is more than simply reckoning with “the power of parabolic language to resonate differently in different contexts,”¹⁵ it is no less than this. It is also more than finding that the parables may grant contemporary readers the ability to “glimpse God’s kingdom,” or to “see ourselves as the objects of their penetrating address... [and] dynamic invitations to transformation.”¹⁶ Yet these things are indicative of what the parables are meant to do, structured in ways that summon the entire range of the salvation economy’s reach to signal good news from God.

In attempting a theological reading of Luke’s early parables, one could proceed straightforwardly with a systematic framework that uses various theological *loci* to reciprocally draw from and inform what is found in these parables.¹⁷ But such a framing may be too ambitious here. While valuing the significance of the dimensions of the creeds and confessions for categorical avenues of understanding to provide a pathway into Jesus’ parables,

15. Stephen I. Wright, “Parables,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 561.

16. Ibid. See also Robert H. Stein, “The Genre of the Parables,” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 35, who says that the parables “do not enhance or convey meaning. On the contrary, they interpret their readers! They create meaning by forcing the reader to participate in the parabolic event.”

17. See the example of Stanley Grenz found in Jason S. Sexton, “The *Imago Dei* Once Again: Stanley Grenz’s Journey Toward a Theological Interpretation of Gen 1:26–27,” *JTI* 4/2 (Fall 2010): 187–206.

neither allegory¹⁸ nor eisegesis are being attempted here. For the readings offered in the remainder of this essay, it is the big themes that matter—the themes that encompass the world. These themes are not exclusively contained *within* the parables as much as they much more so *carry* the parables, providing them the immeasurable resources endemic to and reflective of the archetypal gospel that both the parables and their later expositions promulgate, as do other various means through which the gospel continues to radiate in ecclesial and missionary contexts.

New Cloth on Old Coat (5:36)

While not the first mention of the word *parabole* in Luke,¹⁹ the first parable under consideration begins with the expression, “*legein...parabolēn*.” Jesus is seen responding here to the critique about his disciples’ spiritual practices of fasting and prayer (or lack thereof) with a statement about a wedding. He refers to the bridegroom concept, by which Jesus is said to be drawing upon “an eschatological symbol for divine visitation.”²⁰ This reference makes allusion to “messianic times” (Isa 54:5–6;

18. For a discussion on the history of allegorical interpretation which dominated the previous centuries until the late nineteenth century, although still remains in modern times, see Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 12–14.

19. However, according to Günter Haufe, the earlier usage (Luke 4:23) and next usage (Luke 6:39) identify *parabolē* as a proverb (“,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 3:15), and thus are not addressed as parables in the present essay. See also *BDAG*, 759.

20. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 249.

62:4–5; Jer 2:2; Ezek 16; Hos 2:14–23) and that the end had begun drawing near.²¹ Jesus' pronouncement identified himself as this bridegroom, the celebration of whom "inaugurates a new period."²² Here Luke begins recounting Jesus' first parable, appropriately connected to a wedding and its eschatological features of new life together.²³

The parable itself begins with the hypothetical (and unheard of) situation of a violent tearing²⁴ of cloth from a new garment in order to patch an antiquated one, the hypothetical matter seemingly complicated at least by deep nostalgic loyalties to the older garment. Nothing in the text suggests the older garment as being unfit. Each of these garments, as terrestrial things, possesses "its own integrity."²⁵ And yet the situation would require a tearing or disruption of the new. This particular way of repairing one's clothing in order to prepare one's self for future conduct in the world amid the various elements highlights the unwillingness to concede to the natural economy and instead aims to provide reparations in a schismatic way, disrupting the fabric of the old and the new, and thereby destroying both.

From humanity's first clothing (Gen 3:21) and elsewhere in the Old Testament witness (Gen 28:20; Deut 10:18; cp. Matt

6:30), garments and vestments were understood as divinely bestowed. The agent of this bestowal, according to the Christian tradition, is found in the providential working and agency of the Spirit, the Giver of life. This is not necessarily absent from Luke's purview. So while continuity of purpose of Jesus' ministry is in view in this parable, the fulfilment of God's ancient purposes²⁶ has always included a cosmically transformative, Spirit-wrought renewal (Jer 31) made possible by divinely sanctioned (and prescribed!) blood-shedding action in the present hostile situation.²⁷ The new age is thus in view, just as Christ will roll up the cosmos like an old garment and unfold the new cosmos.²⁸ Therefore whatever is perceived as needing supplementary repair in the normal course can only be rectified by the divine. Although the point remains clear—the two things Jesus mentions are incompatible.²⁹ Like a repeatable proverb, a similar parable is given next to reiterate the point.

New Wine in Old Wineskins (5:37–38)

Parables often lend to the expansion of their subject matter, whether internally or externally.³⁰ Therefore continuing with the new/old paradigm into the second parable, Luke further highlights the ab-

21. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1: 1:1-9:50*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 1:516–17. See also Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 225.

22. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 2d ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 599.

23. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1972), 117–118.

24. The verb here meaning "To divide by use of force" (BDAG, 981).

25. John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, WBC (Dallas, Texas: Word, 1989), 249.

26. For a discussion of this point, see Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 249–250.

27. Note that the only other usage of *kainos* in Luke besides what is found in 5:36, 38 refers to the "new covenant," which accompanies blood atonement (22:20).

28. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 117–118.

29. For this summary point, see Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 277. See also Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 186; and Bock, *Luke*, 520.

30. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 104.

surdity (*oudeis*) of someone performing these hypothetical acts, this time the act being one of putting new wine into old wineskins. According to the natural fermenting process, new vintage necessarily expands in its container, and in the case Jesus depicts, the wine would rupture the brittle skins which have already aged. Of course, in a perfect world unaffected by fallenness and sin, the problem Jesus poses would not necessarily be there. But the fact that there are animal skins in use, which wine is routinely poured into, identifies at least an animal's death that renders the wine container as an object regularly made use of for the contextual setting of Jesus' story. Again, behind this story is something of a *death*.³¹ And although this practice of killing animals for the making of skin was common in the ANE sacrificial culture (just as wearing leather shoes is common today), the very situation highlights this particular moment in the salvation economy, providing readers with a contextual setting for Jesus' story and also for the situation in which they find themselves. The very setting then lends stark contrast between the ways things

31. This essay is unable to discuss the extensive literature on this matter, but it suffices to say that in the beginning while there was surely the so-called death of things like plants in order for humans and animals to eat (Gen 1:29, 30; 2:16), the scriptural account does not introduce death into the narrative as a concrete, actualized reality until the fall, when the serpent is cursed and the earth was cursed along with the cattle and the beasts of the field (3:14). Striking in the narrative is that immediately following the divine cursings (Gen 3:14–19) the Lord graciously provided clothing for Adam and Eve, a basic necessity of life, from “garments of skin” (3:21). For a brief discussion of various hermeneutical issues regarding this matter, see Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012), 123–127.

might come apart in this world vis-à-vis the way they might otherwise (and should) be. Not only is weakness and frailty highlighted with the possibility of loss from an outlandish situation (the wineskins burst and both wine and skins are lost), but the very possibility of loss speaks of the radical contingency of creation. Creation's weakness might be understood as intensified further by the Fall and thereby more troubled by sin, destruction, and loss that is associated with the bursting of the skins in the hypothetical situation Jesus describes.

This parable stresses then not just the incompatibility of the old with the new, but the violent rupture and significant loss that will occur with this would-be foolish and unheard of attempt of pouring new wine into old skins. Throughout Jesus' ministry, of course, he frequently encountered many who had experienced serious loss, whose lives were tragically shattered by that reality (sin) which is foolish and was once unheard of. And from his brokenness—suffering, crucifixion, death, burial—and resurrection, he brought healing and newness to those in the outlandish situation of being shattered by sin, needing forgiveness, restoration, and hope. The skin and every ounce of wine represented in this parable, read theologically, are ultimately gifts from God the Father, Almighty Maker of heaven and earth (Jas 1:17). The presence of these gifts, either desirable old wine (Luke 5:39) or the new wine, is dependent on the fermentation process which accompanies a providentially enabled course. And yet Jesus' parable ends on the note of new wine put into fresh wineskins, leading the eye of the reader toward the future from where this wine will reappear as a future gift marking communion with Jesus and his Father in the kingdom (Luke 22:18, 28–30; cp. Matt 26:29). Therefore Jesus invokes the inauguration of something

eschatological in capacity, which aims to orient Jesus' hearers and Luke's readers on their present mission.

Houses on Rock and Soil (6:47–49)

With the eschatological note being struck in the preceding parable, depicting a feature of the natural course of affairs in this world and drawing attention to the anticipated future, the possibility of present tragedy remains very real, stressing the need for the current mission of the people of God. This parable in Luke 6 then is about discipleship and the two kinds of people who come to Jesus and hear his words.³² The first kind of person is commended as one who performs or acts out Jesus' words; the other does not. The situation highlights a tragedy insofar as being able to *hear* Jesus' words without the subsequent transformational living that flows from following after him is tragedy enough. The personal transformation the hearing should have led to was aborted. But this particular kind of tragedy goes beyond the sad situation of nullifying immobility in the present, and leads further unto missional failure. This tragedy ultimately gives way to final eschatological judgment coordinated with the notion of being reduced to a ruined state, yielding wreckage of great proportions.³³

The scenario pictures two builders. One digs through the topsoil in the earth and lays a solid foundation in the rock for his building. The other extremely foolish one forgoes this extra effort, merely setting his house on top of the soil (*epi tēn gēn*) with no foundation at all to be spoken of (*chōris themeliou*). Because of the present state of the creation continuum, which maintains an order ebbing and flowing

with a potential hostility ardent to challenge any supposed stability, the stream or flood depict potentially chaotic elements ready at any moment to disrupt one's course by coming against a supposed dwelling place in an inevitable collision point of testing. At that reckoning the foolish builder's scant edifice is shown to experience immediate downfall and collapse with irreparable damage.

The analogy is clear. The matter comes down to one's relationship to Christ and his words. No merely supposed faith in Christ will do. But only the active obedience to what he says because of who he is marks the one who will be delivered, since Jesus will judge the living and the dead. In the meantime, for those professing to believe in him, supposing to be his followers and claiming to hear him, it is the soteriological feature of sanctification that marks the shape of genuine salvation. This sanctification inherent to doing his words most properly orients and prepares one for that judgment, believing not just in Jesus Christ, his incarnation, atonement, resurrection, ascension, and present reign, but also in his soon coming return in glory. This belief in gospel realities is further worked out in a sound faith in the Holy Spirit who causes the new birth, bringing about new life, and placing individuals in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and into the communion of saints where sanctification occurs in the mutually beneficial existence of walking together under Jesus' lordship and in the Spirit's empowerment.

These things, verbally confessed and organically lived out, mark the true reception of the forgiveness of sins, and the hope of the resurrection and eternal life. All these are coherently confessed by believers not just in word, but also in action. The christological dimension here invokes remembrance that all hearers (and doers)

32. Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 327.

33. Ibid., 333–334.

of Jesus' words were at one time those whose built environments were barely holding together on the top soil. But in the incarnation, Jesus came to be *homousios anthropois*, frail and willingly susceptible to the same elements that fallen humans are susceptible to, taking upon himself the devastation of the bursting flood against the foolish builder in order to bring hope of a better foundation. This parable itself, unleashed as an exposition of the gospel, summons and "insists that we change our salvation theology so that it conforms to Jesus' teaching and focuses rightly on a relation with Jesus that produces action."³⁴ This doing or action theme is also taken up again in Luke's next parable.

The Moneylender (7:41-43)

The next parable pictures two debtors and highlights the themes of grace and responsibility. The two debtors are graciously lent money, one owing ten times more than the other; both obligated to repay. The "twist" in the story, usually supplying some striking feature which Jesus often uses to make his point in parables, is that the moneylender freely forgives their debt. This would be a truly extraordinary activity, especially in the ancient world.³⁵ The point is then raised in the form of a question summoning the doxological image of love for the forgiving lender: which one will love him more? As a matter of course, mingled with "a certain caution on Simon's part,"³⁶ Jesus' disciple

supposes that the one forgiven the greater debt will love more, a notion appearing to be grounded in some kind of natural law theory, flowing from the concepts of order and justice endemic to the world's natural moral order. And yet, what is to some degree on display is the missional impulse of resources provided for usage in a task—debtors lend money for people to go out and do something worthwhile or profitable in some sense. Then in light of failure (to profit? to be able to repay?) in order to satisfy the debt owed, the heroic role of mercy is extended in this human situation, and so is the doxological affection fueled by forgiveness and release.

The picture translates the reader into an important understanding of salvation, flowing from what the Spirit has wrought for the believer, yielding an ecclesiology and a community characterized by love, worship, and gratitude. Snodgrass remarks, "Cancellation of debts is pure grace...grace that transforms, creates love and relationship, and requires—even demands—a response." Jesus' parable and the accompanying dialogue, then, "demonstrate the presence of the kingdom, the forgiveness made available to sinners, and the responsibility that comes with grace."³⁷ And yet, because this is a juridical parable eliciting a kind of self-judgment in the shadow of ultimate judgment from the Judge whose piercing eyes see all things, and whose measures righteously judge what is right (*orthōs*, v. 43), this parable highlights the proper attitude and action on earth in response to the grace of God extended to the lives of God's own people.

34. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 336.

35. Bock, *Luke*, 699 who argues (contra Nolland *Luke 1–9:20*, 356) that in spite of Old Testament references for forgiving such debts, the remitting of debt is still extraordinary, highlighting the unmerited character of the act as the basis for the gratitude.

36. Reiling and Swellengrebel, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Luke*, 321.

37. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 90.

38. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 145.

Sower and Soils (8:5–8)

Among the best known of parables, the next one Luke presents has been referred to as "*the parable about parables*."³⁸ It is

about a sower and various kinds of soil. It pictures the sower going out to sew his seed, which makes “explicit that the parable is about the seed, i.e., the word of God preached by Jesus.”³⁹ An earlier parable has already focused on the theme of Jesus’ word (6:47–49), which is picked up here in an expansive manner. As a parable of growth, the seed is spoken of as a continuous, ongoing happening, a “creaturely process of growth.” In the process humans have no cause of influence since, as the parable highlights, “the power of growth comes from God the creator.”⁴⁰ This is therefore a parable about growth—spiritual growth with a spiritual outcome—needing very little theological exposition beyond what the text clearly states, since Jesus there explains much of its theology in plain language (vv. 11–15). It is enigmatic speech, however, not necessarily being a readily accessible story to the banal hearers of the day, which prompts his disciples to ask what the parable was about (v. 9).

Of course, each of the seeds bears the ability to bring forth fruit, the emphasis being on receptivity and the actual bearing of fruit, with the provocative issue being one of “unproductive and inadequate hearing.”⁴¹ The condition of faithful confession and spiritual fruit-bearing in the believing life is, again, not just in hearing the word but in holding fast to it and thereby *producing*. This producing is the divinely intended normative course for those being sanctified by grace, for those receptive to and actively dependent on divine work. The preparation of the soil is not an issue raised at all in the parable,

since it is the gospel that transforms the believing heart, purifying and enabling believers to bear fruit from beginning to end. But the exact timing and location of that transformation “is the decision of God, who is ever an electing God.”⁴² Therefore divine freedom moves according to divine prerogative to gratuitously invest and endow creation with the propensity toward growth amid the tragic reality that things in the world are presently not all as they should be.

As this paper has argued so far, Jesus’ exposition of this parable highlights that the parables move according to the impulse of how confessed theology runs when it is coherently conceived in a manner bearing explanatory power. This reaches the span to which systematic theology extends, which remains isolated neither in itself, nor among its own subheadings, nor in its organic extension into ethics. Theology is concerned with all things created and uncreated, visible and invisible, and with all things in their *particular relations* to God and to one another; again, dealing not with the created order in isolation, but the created order in its status as *creaturely* and therefore radically contingent.⁴³ Jesus is seen here giving this same kind of confession, proclamation, and explanation with no indication either that the crowd around has changed as he expounds the details to his disciples. This highlights, of course, the porous boundaries between Jesus’ followers and the crowd.⁴⁴ Yet it also suggests that the parables have deeply inextricable theological meaning, pulling the masks from the superficial recipients in its profoundly eschatological vitality since “it embodies the activity of God sowing his

39. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 319.

40. Claus Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus: In Light of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. Friedemann W. Golka and Alastair H. B. Logan (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 186.

41. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 176.

42. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 199.

43. A. N. Williams, “What is Systematic Theology?” *IJST* 11 (2009): 47.

44. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 326.

restored people through the preaching of Jesus." This parable, then, is about a kind of hearing of the word which "captures the whole person," bringing forth productive living⁴⁵ as God's people journey with God on the divine mission in the world.

Lamp Under a Bowl (8:16)

The fruitful or productive-living theme comes to fore once again in the final parable under consideration in this article—the lamp to be set on a stand. The point is abundantly clear, especially as it summarizes Jesus' Galilean teaching ministry. In this context, the light risks not being seen and the bearers of the light risk failing to set the lamp where it needs to be in order that others might see. Amid the present darkness, the light does not shine everywhere, which is the reason for the missionary activity of the disciples in 9:1–6. Jesus' disciples are encouraged by his statement in the next verse, the intensely eschatological revealing statement that no secrets will remain undisclosed, relating somehow to the disciples taking account of (*blepete*) what they hear, and that the integrity of their lives would match what they hear. In these ways they would prove good stewards in light of the coming judgment.⁴⁶

The massive theological insight here is missed if the light concept is minimized. This notion of light harkens to the first image moving out at creation's dawn, when God moves to create something that is not God. And in spite of living in the darkness into which creation has tragically fallen, a time of hope is forthcoming where one

45. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 176.

46. Compare this with similar language used by Paul in 1 Cor 3:10 and the language throughout that chapter about the building which will face coming judgment; cp. with Jesus' parable of the two houses in Luke 6:47–49.

day "There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light" (Rev 22:5, NIV). The Lord Jesus Christ, God of God, Light from Light, very God of very God, has penetrated this present darkness, shining into it (John 1:5) in order to bring about this forthcoming day. The canonically and theologically rich theme of light also correlates with the weighty glory theme, highlighting the progress of redemption and the cosmic renewal that takes place through God's actions and God's agents. This redemptive action draws all things together into the presence of the divine, who dwells in inapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16) and who moves creation, in its missional impulse, into the illumination of that light and thereby into the very life of the triune God.

Conclusion

The manner of theological exegesis of the parables given here refutes the "seizure" that some recent missional thinkers have concluded systematic theology eventuates.⁴⁷ On the contrary, this kind

47. See Franke citing Barth on this point, who affirms that "in dogmatics strictly speaking there are no comprehensive views, no final conclusions and results. There is only the investigation and teaching which take place in the act of dogmatic work and which, strictly speaking, must continually begin again at the beginning in every point" (Karl Barth, *CD 1/2*, 868 in John Franke, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2009], 70; see also John R. Franke, "No Comprehensive Views, No Final Conclusions: Karl Barth, Open-Ended Dogmatics, and the Emerging Church," in Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson, eds., *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 300–322). While asserting Barth's *Church Dogmatics* as probably

of exposition marks the coherence of genuine confession, faithfully and missionally rendered in the present context in ways which coherently and creatively resound for the world the glory of the true and lasting world where Jesus is King. This world of which both the parables and Christian confession testify is the real and ultimate location of good news that creatures have the privilege of being brought into for the sake of others. This view of systematic theology as a kind of missional exposition of the gospel itself finds these renderings representing the disseminating rays in which the gospel is connected to the source of those rays, the author and perfecter of faith.

In the parables, the repetition of some of the Old Testament prophets' basic themes are also manifest, which suggests that they render the same expositional resoundings of the gospel that happen throughout the parables, throughout other scriptural expositions of the gospel, and also throughout various present-day expositions, whether by evangelism or other modes of faithful confession that occur in unending forms. Traditional systematic categories have often provided the structure that these descriptions have taken, as is seen from the earliest creeds and confessions. In this way, systematic theology was on the scene long before contemporary missiology and biblical scholarship showed up because God's people have always confessed God's lordship in Spirit-enabled ways that gave particular contours to their confession and mission. These confessions naturally

the twentieth century's enduring systematic theology, in spite of Barth's comments to the contrary, A.N. Williams asserts that Barth's dogmatics is a system, which few others would deny (*The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, and Ratio* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 3).

took specific shapes that sensibly lisped the truth of God and sketched the surrounding world as it is understood under Jesus' lordship. In this way, parables are "prophetic instruments, the tool especially of those who have a message from God."⁴⁸ With the way the theological themes appear throughout the parables in these texts (as well as in the other parables), perhaps the appearance of these theological themes in their missional character say more about the texts as divine writ than they do about anything else, including anything about their source material from an alleged Jesus tradition. In this way, then, the parables highlighted here showcase their unique character as Scripture.

At this point it does not seem too suggestive that the notion of the word "parable," with its large semantic range,⁴⁹ does not lend to the further opening of this range to the span of the wider systematic theological range (with its ensuing confessional and missional thrust), which the parables are based on insofar as they flow from the theological priority of God's mission.⁵⁰ A fundamental problem remaining is with the different definitions of parables offered by various New Testament scholars,⁵¹ who especially struggle to give an account for how God's kingdom

48. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 8.

49. Stein, *The Gospel of Luke*, 185.

50. For a succinctly stated version of this position, not wanting to argue for "The Biblical Basis of Mission" but for "The Missional Basis of the Bible," see Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 22–23.

51. E.g., Hultgren gives a "working definition" of a parable as "a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between God's kingdom, actions or expectations and something in this world, real or imagined" (*The Parables of Jesus*, 3).

described in the parables actually works in the course of the world's affairs.⁵² This is the contribution that the theological (thus missional) reading suggested in this paper seeks to make. The parables surely do tell of eschatology and of life on this earth; they tell of God and humanity; they provide "handles" for the kingdom, permitting readers to see what they would otherwise not see, presuming that we should look at a specific reality that is otherwise not noticed as carefully. The parables move readers to action, awakening insight and stimulating response to God. Like the gospel message itself, parables seek the "radical cross-bearing, God-imitating response worthy of the name 'conversion.'" To this end and in most cases Snodgrass describes a parable as, "*an expanded analogy used to convince and persuade.*"⁵³ But this same definition could apply to many other things, including a converted life (cp. 2 Cor 3:2; 5:10–12), or any other explanation of the gospel. The systematic theological understanding of the parables offered in this essay, however, transcends a number of scholarly debates about the parables,⁵⁴ representing what confessional scholarship has been aiming at all along, while proposing an understanding of how the gospel of God's work in the world is expounded in the parables just as it is in the myriad of forms in which faithful confession is instantiated.

52. This is the point made in Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 7–9.

53. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 9.

54. E.g., see the discussion of the parable/allegory debate in Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 29–69.

These limitless renderings of the gospel are precisely what the parables display in their distilled, punchy, and somewhat embryonic ways. The explorations given above are attempted as test cases while the exegetical burden of this essay's argument would need to take up the remaining parables in Luke and the other Gospels, and then the entirety of Scripture in order to proceed making sense of the "missional basis" of all these things seen in the divine action in the salvation economy, and in Scripture. The kind of reading proposed, however, only continues to hold forth a faithful reading inasmuch as it also moves out the redeemed community in precisely the same manner today as was found in Jesus' movement, and the apostle's inextricably linked faith and mission, reflected later in creedal renderings of the biblical gospel.⁵⁵ In a manner similar to the functional aim of the parables and the gospel, then, the church's mission also "must permeate every manifestation of the church's life," while equally emitting "a dynamic impulse for the alteration both of 'the world' and of the church itself." In this way, the parables as scriptural text are meant to shape the church, even as "the permanent identity of the church and its alteration are united in the process of its mission."⁵⁶

55. Webster, "Confession and Confessions," 131.

56. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed in Light of Today's Questions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1972), 148.