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New Methods of Parable Interpretation

The interpretation of the parables has entered on a new phase. I am not referring to J. Jeremias' famous book, *The Parables of Jesus*, because, rich as it is in interpretation of detail and all that involves Aramaic learning, it does not introduce new principles or basic insights, but recognizes the pioneering quality of C. H. Dodd's *Parables of the Kingdom* in this regard. Now we have new names and a new approach which, like much that is good and much that is bad, originates with Bultmann. But first let me go back and suggest the right framework.

I go back to 1888, to the first of Jülicher's great volumes. Jülicher ruled out allegory as a method of parable interpretation. A parable has one point and one point only, to be inferred from the story as a whole. It is not a series of points plus subordinate points, to be transferred, by matching allegory, in the exposition. What preachers had been doing for 1,700 years (since Origen), even after the Reformation had tried to get exegesis on the right track, was wrong. Jülicher gave all the reasons for this thesis in his first volume of 328 pages; then, in a second volume of 643 pages, he demonstrated how the one main, non-allegorical meaning worked out. Most studies since 1888 have taken Jülicher as axiomatic. A parable must not be taken to mean whatever the ingenuity of the expositor can stretch it to mean.¹

The next noteworthy study was C. H. Dodd's *Parables of the Kingdom* (1935), important not only for the attempt to get back to the original meaning in Jesus' use of the parables (admitting the evidence in the parables, as they now stand in our Gospels, of adaptation to church needs – as Form Criticism had shown, though a good many in England were still fighting rear-guard actions against Form Criticism), but also for setting the parables in relation to the eschatological problem, which everybody had avoided since Schweitzer confronted New Testament scholarship so sharply with it in 1906.

Jeremias' book *The Parables of Jesus* (1947),² which stands on the shoulders of Dodd, is more comprehensive in exposition, and supplies a

1. For a criticism of Jülicher cf. J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1954), pp. 16f.; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1935), pp. 24ff. Jeremias thinks that Jülicher went only half way. He was content with a general ethical interpretation and did not attempt to recover the original meaning (viz. the eschatological character) of the parables. Recently E. Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus*, 2d ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1964), pp. 92–96, has objected that Jülicher is too dependent on Aristotle's definition of parable. He agrees with Jeremias' criticism that Jülicher did not perceive the eschatological implications of the parables (cf. *ibid.*, p. 102, n.5).

2. The original work was extensively revised in the second edition (1952); the English translation was made from the third edition.

greater wealth of detail out of the author's Aramaic learning. It has at least one distinctive feature: namely, the attempt to point out and classify ways in which the church adapted the parables of the Master for its own needs (generalizing conclusions, transforming Jesus' exposure of his critics into moral exhortation for the church, etc.). But the book belongs essentially to the same era of interpretation which Jeremias gave Dodd credit for inaugurating. 'It is unthinkable [he wrote] that there should ever be any retreat from the essential lines laid down by Dodd for the interpretation of the parables of Jesus ... It was C. H. Dodd's book which achieved a breakthrough ... introducing a new era in the interpretation of the parables.'³

Now we have Dan Otto Via's vigorous and stimulating book: *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*.⁴ The author, after paying tribute to Dodd and Jeremias, tells us, with the brash confidence of a man writing his first book, that they are merely historical interpreters; that is to say, they relate the meaning of the parables to the original situation in Jesus' ministry, or in the church's *Sitz im Leben* down to ca. AD 80. That interpretation is good as far as it goes, but in these last days God has raised up Rudolf Bultmann and bestowed on us the existential interpretation, which must now be the end-term in the process of explaining the parables, if they are to have any meaning for today's people, confused not only about God and the transcendent, but also about their own existence and its goals. Dodd and Jeremias and those who plied their trade on the Gospel texts were industrious and well-meaning, but they did not see far enough, and their results occupy what we have to regard as a halfway house. Via is concerned – and it is a very proper concern – that this approach 'threatens to leave the parables in the past with nothing to say to the present'; 'Jesus' ministry as an historical event remains fixed in the past.'⁵ (We shall return to Via's more positive argument later.) His way of thinking is what I mean by the new turn in interpretation which will occupy the centre of the stage for a few years – until we go back to Jeremias.

In approaching the parables, our basic need is to be at ease with metaphor, and to realize that we cannot get away from it. We must come to terms with allusive symbolic language. The threat of technology to culture is that people become matter-of-fact and unimaginative, and this may be a sinister step toward depersonalization and decivilization. The study of literature takes on a new responsibility in such a context: that of humanizing culture, and of being, in the old phrase, 'humaner letters.'

The Bible, of course, is full of metaphor: feasting, marriage, adultery, slavery, and so on. The eschatological metaphors are strange at first, but we can get used to them: the Kingdom of God coming, the end of the age, the last judgment. For the most part, Jesus' language is much simpler: the

3. Jeremias, *Parables*, pp. 7, 18. For a recent evaluation of Dodd's work cf. Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus*, pp. 110–17.

4. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967.

5. Via, *Parables*, pp. 22, 202.

imagery of familiar things in house and field. It is simple language, but *elemental* and capable of profound *meaning*.

W. A. Curtis' treatment of Jesus' language, which he describes as 'metaphorical and figurative, yet simple,' is still worth reading, though written before much of the current argument about hermeneutics.⁶ Curtis points out that Jesus had no word for 'religious,' 'spiritual,' 'conscience.' 'For tendency he has no other word than leaven.' But 'what Hebrew and Aramaic lacked in precision and variety of terms they made up for in metaphorical elasticity.'⁷

Every study of Jesus' teaching must indicate the meaning it gives to parable, even if it breaks it down into subclassifications: for example, Jülicher's *Gleichnisse, Parabeln, Beispielerzählungen*; or Bultmann's *Bildworte, Metaphern, Gleichnisse, Parabeln*. Here we may quote Curtis' simple and comprehensive definition. He is not concerned, as were Jülicher and Bultmann, with exhaustive literary analysis, but with bringing out what was distinctive in Jesus' teaching. 'It is of the essence of a parable,' he writes, 'that, in relation to the subject which it is spoken to illustrate, it should not need a final explanation. It should be self-explaining, self-evident ... But in practice it presupposes what Jesus calls the hearing ear and the seeing eye.'⁸

This latter feature Curtis illustrates from the famous parable told by Nathan to King David (cf. 2 Sam. 12:1-15). Here is an example of how the parable can be understood objectively to the point of emotion by the man who is its subject. David understood in one sense. He realized that this was not a story for entertainment at the dinner table. Someone was being exposed. He failed to see that it applied to his own recent actions with Bathsheba. He was the one being exposed, but he lacked the hearing ear without which a parable is a mere story and fails to make its intended point. Hence Mark 4:11f. is not to be taken as a stupid tangle of Mark's, obscuring Jesus' intention and inviting contrast with vv. 33f. This feature of Jesus' experience is justified in common experience (Nathan's, Isaiah's, and Jesus'). It is commented on elsewhere in Jesus' teaching (cf. the Parable of the Talents, the excuses in Luke 14, etc.).

Referring to the work of Jeremias as 'epochmaking' for all subsequent study of the parables, Norman Perrin remarks that 'the success of Jeremias's work demands that we accept his starting-point, namely that any parable as it now stands in the Gospels represents the teaching of the early church, and the way back from the early church to the historical Jesus is a long and arduous one.'⁹ In a few cases the original form of the parable had not been changed - Perrin instances the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son - 'but these are exceptions, and they are exceptions which prove the rule.'

6. Cf. W. A. Curtis, *Jesus Christ the Teacher* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), pp. 99-107.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 106, 99.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

9. N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 21.

Jeremias has his own way of saying this, but he is less pessimistic about the possibility of reconstructing the original parables of Jesus and of demonstrating *how* the early church adapted, modified, and provided generalizing conclusions.¹⁰ We are concerned with Perrin's over-confident methodology in handling parables – for example, in lopping off conclusions and generally scaling down the text in order to reconstruct the original form. But we welcome Jeremias' judgment: 'The primary task of the exegete of the parables is to set the parable in its original context in the ministry of Jesus so that by an effort of historical imagination he may grasp the critical point of the parable, and then find the parallel or analogy to which it is directed.'¹¹

We should take stock of our gains, before we let ourselves be persuaded that the historical interpretation is not enough, but needs something added to it. Do we really need an existential interpretation over and above the historical? The latter, as understood by Dodd and Jeremias, is not simply *past*, and certainly is not dead or incomprehensible. It makes contact with Jesus, and that contact is the source of faith. 'Our task is a return to the actual living voice of Jesus ... To meet with him can alone give power to our preaching.'¹² Jeremias believes that such a return is possible, and Dodd agrees that we can penetrate through what the church did with the parables to their original usage and meaning.¹³ Such an investigation is not just an interesting comparison, like comparing Paul with John, or Hebrews with Revelation, or Ephesians with Colossians. It is a return to the fountainhead, from which all else in the church is derivative.

Is that not enough? Is it not a sufficient goal of our quest – granted, of course, that the original words of Jesus are not time-bound and limited in their reference to the Judaism of AD 30. This point does not really have to be argued. We may take a stand here, and content ourselves with quoting some recent remarks of Amos Wilder: 'We misunderstand [Jesus'] cures of the blind and the paralysed and the lepers if we see them only as individual cases of wonder-working ... The greater meaning to which they all point is that of the deliverance of all men ... The New Testament ministry of Jesus had to do not with the driving out of demons from the few but with the dispossession of Satan generally.'¹⁴ It is not difficult or illegitimate to infer that this ministry has equal meaning for our own day.

In this kind of exposition – an aspect of the continuing quest of the

10. Cf. Jeremias, *Parables*, ch. 2: 'The Return to Jesus from the Primitive Church'; and also p. 9.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

13. Cf. Dodd, *Parables*, p. 111 and *passim*. Perrin's *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* makes the process seem very difficult, though in principle he agrees with Jeremias and Dodd. On the other side, note the remarks of F. W. Beare, 'Concerning Jesus of Nazareth,' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 87 (1968), 129.

14. A. N. Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 73. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 74: 'Jesus was not just a healer ... His cures were aspects and dramatizations of the world-changing drama in which he was the principal.'

historical Jesus – the bridge between now and then is open. He whose word had liberating power then still speaks. He is still the Lord and still has disciples. The strained discussions of the Bultmann school about how the Proclaimer became the Proclaimed seem very artificial and unnecessary.

We may now proceed to consider Via's thesis that the scholarship represented by Dodd and Jeremias is too exclusively historico-critical, and thus fails to bring out the contemporary meaning of the parables. The new phase of parable interpretation appears to have a three-fold root:

(a) There is the appeal to the parables by scholars of the Bultmann school, who find in them an authentic core of Jesus' teaching and an 'implicit' Christology. This material is significant, not as *ipsissima verba Jesu*, but rather as the origin of the later faith of the church. Thus the problem of continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith – a very real problem in Bultmannian circles – is solved by a new emphasis on the parables. In them the ground or object of the later Kerygma is discovered as its source and first Proclaimer.¹⁵

(b) Secondly, there is the fresh approach of a 'new' hermeneutic, determined by existentialist assumptions. The recent interest in contemporary relevance subordinates the original meaning to contemporary meaning, and so treats the parables as having the capacity to generate fresh relevance in today's situations.

(c) Finally, there is a new fertilization of New Testament research by contact with other literary studies. This has always been a feature of Amos Wilder's work, and it is the most notable feature of Via's book.¹⁶ It is also a mark of G. V. Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables*¹⁷ – a more mature, if less vigorous, study than Via's.

The parables were ripe for new applications, additions, generalizations, and even allegorical additions, in the first and subsequent generations of the church's experience. Dan Otto Via's brilliantly suggestive book fastens onto, and develops, this point. He makes a clear distinction between the original reference to the situation of Jesus' time – the main stress of Dodd's pioneering work, and to a less extent of Jeremias' – and the full meaning which can be brought out in subsequent use. He even insists that this reapplication and discernment of meaning, rather than the original reference, is the true goal of interpretation. Here he is open to criticism, and in places he may be making the parable mean what he likes. He certainly runs the risk of arbitrariness, although he always sets out the original reference – what he calls the historical interpretation – and makes that the starting-point of, or allows it to have some control over, his own existential interpretation.

15. According to Jüngel the parables reveal Jesus himself, whose life (*Geschichte*) brings the being of God before mankind in acts of love. (The Parable of the Prodigal Son can be so interpreted.) Cf. Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus*, p. 163: 'Seine Geschichte ist die Sprachgeschichte des sich als Liebe ereignenden Seins Gottes.'

16. Cf. N. Perrin's review in *Interpretation*, 21 (1967), 465–69.

17. London: S.P.C.K., 1964.

In other words, Via is offering a purely literary approach and methodology. Thus, in his opening chapter, distinguishing parable from allegory, he explains that a parable is a unity with its own coherence. Its meaning, therefore, must come out of itself rather than from events or ideas outside it. That is clear enough, but too rigidly assertive. This kind of overstress is a main weakness of the book, although, as his treatment develops, Via guards against this criticism to some extent.

Jesus, Via holds, was not providing interpretations of Judaea's – or his own – situation, but revealing possibilities of existence. Again, the implicit rejection of the historical, the attempted elimination of the ancient and particular reference, alerts us critically, but the author has a point and must be allowed to state it fully. His emphasis here certainly makes the parables contemporary. He is not advocating adding anything to them, or touching them up. Much of the material of the parables does not, in fact, need to be explained or translated. Their inherent potential must be left to produce its own effect, which some kinds of adaptation may actually neutralize. Their basic insights (*Daseinsverständnis*) do not need to be reinterpreted, and it is a mistake to call them 'the translatable content of the parables.'¹⁸ They refer to the essential conditions of human existence, which remain the same through the generations – that is to say, are always contemporary. Apart from this continuity, no ancient text, biblical or secular, would have any significance for us. That is well said. But in Via's approach there is a peril of dehistoricizing – of treating a parable as a timeless utterance, and being essentially indifferent to whether it was spoken by Jesus, or a Hebrew prophet, or Albert Camus. 'A parable as a whole,' Via writes, 'dramatizes an ontological possibility – the two basic ontological (human) possibilities which the parables present are the gain or loss of existence, becoming authentic or inauthentic ... The prodigal son gains his existence, and the unforgiving servant loses his.'¹⁹

We must not, however, be overcritical. We should note, for instance, the admission that 'authentic existence has been decisively realised in Jesus' life, but men may still lose their existence.'²⁰ The historical reference has not been entirely expunged. Again – though somewhat confusingly, because he is weaving in the Fuchs-Ebeling terminology of language-event – Via writes: 'The coming of the kingdom is the possibility of faith's coming to man from beyond himself – and Jesus is a model for that faith. ... The parables confront man as a language-event ... The language-event is the indirect expression of Jesus' faith as a possibility for other men.'²¹ Here we have a partial realization of the significance of the original utterance *then*, in those circumstances. Again, we are told that what Jesus effected on our behalf was 'the concrete actualisation of authenticity,' and that this broke the 'power of inauthenticity.'

18. Via, *Parables*, p. 40, n.36.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 41. Note the introduction of Heideggerian terminology.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 193f.

If the word 'sin' is no longer fit for use, some such circumlocution may perhaps serve, so we read on hopefully: 'The eschatological coming of the Kingdom of God is Jesus' faith as a model of our faith. The parables are the richest expression of the faith which Jesus called men to.'²² It is good to hear that there is something concrete and particular, that is, rooted in an individual person, in time and history. We are further encouraged to read that, though past events cannot be repeated, they may permit entry of a 'quality of existence in which later generations can participate.'²³ That remark would apply to the Exodus in Hebrew experience. In New Testament terms, it means that Christians may share in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection: 'I share in the quality of existence which came into history in Jesus' earthly life, and the continuing availability of that quality is the resurrection.' Here Via's Bultmannian inheritance shows through, in the refusal to understand the resurrection as an event in the life (or after-life) of Jesus, and the typical confusion of the resurrection (as referred to in the Gospels) with the church's later proclamation of it. We must be content with the explanation: 'The resurrection was his quality of existence attaining full power through death ... the completion of Jesus' actualization of authentic existence.'²⁴ Something is salvaged here, nonetheless, from the jettisoning of the cargo of historical reality in the Gospels: 'Jesus' ministry as a historical event remains fixed in the past, and salvation occurs through encounter with the proclamation of the event.'²⁵ (Cf. Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; 6:2; John 5:24; 17:8, 20).

A parable is pregnant with much more meaning than even Jesus intended. To say this is not to put it into the category of allegory, but to insist that it requires perception which not everyone has.²⁶ The parables have proved capable of ever new reapplications to the needs of the churches, in Matthew and Luke's generation and in our generation. Preachers all through the centuries have assumed this, and Dan Otto Via provides the latest methodology for it. But this capacity for new relevance has not depended on (a) lack of feeling for historical accuracy; on (b) sheer inventiveness; or on (c)

22. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 202. Cf. E. Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus* (London: S.P.C.K., 1966), p. 137: 'Faith has its origin neither in the event of the resurrection ... nor in a special self-consciousness of Jesus; faith has its origin in the word of Jesus. Jesus has put faith into language.' I appreciate the distinction which Miss Linnemann makes between *exegesis*, which makes the original language-event intelligible to moderns, for whom the meaning has been refracted by nineteen centuries of history and culture, and *preaching*, which aims at causing the language-event to regain meaning - i.e. to awake faith, transform existence (cf. *ibid.*, p. 33).

26. Cf. Curtis, *Jesus Christ the Teacher*, p. 83 (quoted above). The mark of a disciple is that he has this capacity - yet sometimes disciples are no more perceptive than the crowd. For some interesting remarks on this point, cf. E. Schweizer, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967), pp. 51f. Cf. also D. E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 137.

the appeal of various *Sitze im Leben* in the earliest churches. It has depended rather on the inherent potential and the manysidedness of the parables themselves.

The composer Elgar once remarked, after listening to the performance of one of his works: 'I didn't know it had so much in it.' This was a matter, not of 'author's intention' or prediction or any sort of devised extra meaning, but of the inspired creativeness of the original author. Such depth is a mark of great artistry as contrasted with the trivia of literature.

A parable belongs essentially to this literary genre; it is *sui generis* in potency, a bomb capable of more than one explosion – or, if that metaphor be thought too mechanical and unliterary, a plant capable of flowering in new colours each spring. There is a distinctive propriety in the parable which defies analogy. To quote Geraint Vaughan Jones: 'The test of the rightness or wrongness of any interpretation of the parables is not whether it conforms to some preconceived idea of what a parable ought to be, but the extent to which it is congruous with the parable as a whole.'²⁷ In his own way, Jones distinguishes between the reference intended by Jesus in his parables and the wider reference and continuing meaning of which they are capable in later cultures. His chapter entitled 'Towards a Wider Interpretation'²⁸ demonstrates this at length – and more plausibly than Via's contrast of historical interpretation with existential interpretation.

The parable is not an entirely new literary form. Metaphor and simile and illustrative tale are ubiquitous in literature. In Israel's heritage there were the rabbinic examples of parable, not lacking in wit or in power to discern analogy. We may, however, claim that Jesus' parables were superior, not so much in wit as in detailed power of observation and imagination; for example, Jesus had watched children squabbling (Matt. 11:16–17), and a poor woman sweeping (Luke 15:8–9) – ordinary humdrum details of life's routine, not extraordinary things like extravagant attitudes of prayer (Luke 18:9–14). And of course there was an awareness, peculiar to Jesus, of the real import of the situation he was creating around him (the 'coming' of the Kingdom of God), including a sharp diagnosis of the state of Judaism at that time (Luke 13:6–9; 19:41–44; Mark 12:1–9). Jones notes the 'down-to-earth secularity'²⁹ of the parables, meaning roughly what Funk calls their 'everydayness,' Dodd their 'realism,' and Wilder their 'realistic authenticity.' He also mentions their combination of particularity and concreteness with universality in the perspicacity of a master mind. The parables are much more than ethical examples (*Beispielerszählungen*). For instance, the parable of the Good Samaritan is not simply an interesting story about how to do a good turn. 'It is not a pleasant tale about the Traveller who did his good

27. G. V. Jones, *Art and Truth of the Parables*, p. 108. This book is equally deserving of attention with Via's. Its author is comparable with Via in independence of judgment and better versed in general literature.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 135–66.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

deed: it is a damning indictment of social, racial and religious superiority ... [It assumes] an imperative which gives it a general validity transcending the moment of its utterance.³⁰ The Parable of the Guests who excused themselves (Luke 14:15–24) must be interpreted along similar lines. It refers in the first instance to Jesus' indignant exposure of the orthodox of his time, who ought to have responded to his preaching. But it shouts for other applications. No subtle hermeneutic is needed to make this contemporary. If we make the original reference clear, we may leave it to the conscience of the reader; if that is alert the original imperative will still be found to have a cutting edge.

Let us look at the Parable of the Good Samaritan in greater detail. It must be classified as a *Beispiel* *zählung*. That was Jesus' intention (cf. v. 37b: 'Do likewise'). The lawyer's question is well and truly answered, and we need not complain, as fussy commentators do, if the answer reports what a neighbour does, rather than telling us who is to be regarded as a neighbour. The question was not superfluous (as v. 29 might seem to imply). It meant: How far do I extend the limit of neighbourly obligation? To all Jews, or to good Jews only, or to Jews and proselytes, or to all mankind? The answer requires a precise exegesis of Leviticus 19:18: 'You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Is 'neighbour' here synonymous with 'your own people,' or does it refer to a wider circle? By the time of the New Testament Jews had had a lot to do with non-Israelites, mainly in unhappy confrontations; could they be expected to regard them as neighbours? Could there be a nice pagan? Were the virtues of the heathen only 'glittering vices,' with which God's people should have no contact? There was a real question here, and it was reasonable to pose it to anyone who set up as a rabbi. At least it would force him to indicate whether he took a liberal or a conservative stance. But in any case Leviticus 19:18 required contemporary exegesis in the time of Christ, six centuries after it was first formulated. Jesus provided this by a graphic paradoxical *Beispiel*, and all we moderns need is elucidation of detail – for example, the tension between Samaritan and Jew at that period, and the function of priest and levite. The *denaria* of v. 35 require nothing more than translation. No transposition by hermeneutic methodology into twentieth-century terms is necessary. Dan Otto Via's schematic transference from the historico-critical level to the existential would be over-elaborate in the case of this parable. It stirs the conscience of all sensitive readers and refuses to remain a mere criticism of Jewish-Samaritan *apartheid* in the first century of our era.

We should resist the temptation to treat this parable as a *Beispiel*, not of neighbourliness, but of the God-man relationship. The unnamed sufferer then becomes suffering humanity, the priest the unworthy religious leaders who fail to minister, and the Samaritan becomes Christ (or God). In the service of a more theological exegesis, allegory has often been resorted to. But why

30. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

not be content with the ethical relevance of this story? There is no lack of parables whose point is more theological (e.g. Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11–32; or Labourers in the Vineyard, Matt. 20:1–16). E. Jünger makes the parable more complex than it need be.³¹ It is a *Beispielzählung*, but in the total context of Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God and of his making real of God's love. It makes explicit 'die eschatologische Einheit von Zuspruch und Forderung.'

Jones argues that parables cannot be sorted in terms of types or themes.³² The classification must be according to *applicability*. Some parables exhaust their meaning with reference to the immediate situation (e.g. Mark 12:1–12); others bear on one point only; still others have more general applicability (e.g. the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son).³³ Here, despite their considerable differences, Jones agrees with Dan Otto Via. 'The *Sitz im Leben*,' he tells us, 'is not always of primary importance to the modern application of the parable ... Over-insistence on the original context, though necessary to the total understanding of the parable, can easily become a purely academic concern, while the expanding meaning is lost sight of.'³⁴

It is this insight that inaugurates a new approach to parable interpretation, moving beyond Dodd and Jeremias. While it actually forms the foundation of Via's book, it is perhaps more solidly argued by Jones, because the latter is not so obviously under the influence of a current fashion. 'The tendency of the modern approach,' he writes, '... has been to restrict freedom of interpretation by concentrating too much on the historical ... The parables, because they are artistic forms, have an independent life of their own, and are much more than objects of antiquarian or historical enquiry, or hermeneutical exposition severely limited by the circumstances of their invention.'³⁵ That is to say, the historical research which was necessary for full evaluation and to prevent unrestrained allegorizing – this was Jülicher's point – must not now be allowed to become a limiting factor, which would prevent our making the parables available to the modern reader in their constant potential for a new understanding of life and for the revelation of the authority of Jesus their coiner – the one authority to which human life can appeal; the way and truth and life for mankind, yesterday, today, and for ever.

Let us be positive in our appreciation of the new possibilities opened up by Via and Jones, even though they go beyond the historical interpretation. At the same time, we must surely build on that interpretation, and not bypass it.

Those of us who are content with the historical reconstruction of meaning

31. Cf. Jünger, *Paulus und Jesus*, pp. 172f.

32. Cf. Jones, *Art and Truth of the Parables*, pp. 135–41. With this argument contrast Perrin's sevenfold classification according to subject-matter (in *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 82).

33. According to Jones, *Art and Truth of the Parables*, pp. 141–43, there are only nine parables in the last category.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 165 (italics added).

35. *Ibid.*, p. 221 (italics added).

come under condemnation from Via. We have to admit that sometimes there is no continuing reference; the significance a parable had for Jesus' contemporaries is all the meaning there is. Mark 12:1-12, for example, referred to Jesus' death and had no other meaning – apart from an exposure of the callousness that betrayed him. But the majority of the parables are not so confined in their possible range of applicability. They are told in similes and local references that pertain to ancient Palestine. But they also have a timeless and placeless quality, and their wider reference is not limited.

Surely we may presuppose in the ordinary churchman some capacity to extract meaning for his own life from a past example, even though the circumstances cannot be repeated. That does involve a bit of imagination, a knowledge of words, an ability to grasp the point of a comparison or picture. But has modern education left us bereft of these? Do we need the terminology of a fashionable philosophy to give Jesus' words modern currency? Or do we need only discipleship to make them seminal for our inward life? We city-dwellers who never sweep diligently for a lost coin, who never see a sower sowing or a shepherd with his sheep, are still puzzled and tempted people. We need, and can get, stimulus and guidance in what was said nineteen centuries ago. The plain historical exposition is enough, without an elaborate hermeneutical process of contemporizing. One thing is needful, the good part which Mary chose. To labour with the later Heidegger may be simply to miss the opportunity – as Martha did, for all her bustling in the kitchen.