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Printed by Publication Perspectives, (03) 9561 1800

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Window on the World

From Randal Dick,
Superintendent of missions



It's time to rethink mission focus

Paul identified himself in his letter to the Romans as a servant of Christ. He did the same in his pastoral epistle to Titus, as did James and Peter and John in their epistles.

It is only from the perspective of a servant—better yet of a slave of Christ—that we can rightly understand our part in the mission work that Christ has given us.

Stewardship

The form of servant hood that we fulfil on behalf of Jesus Christ is best described as that of a steward. Stewardship involves discretionary authority to commit resources, along with a direct accountability to the Master for the use of those resources.

The steward is to use the resources committed to him or her to further the goals of the Master.

That is our starting point in mission. First Corinthians 6:20 says that we have been bought with a price. I like to keep that in mind. If I have been bought, then I am owned, and any discretionary decisions I make should produce the results that the Owner seeks.

From the Owner's perspective

The Owner is explicit about what he wants. In John 17 Jesus is talking to the Father. He rehearses the fact that he came to glorify the Father. Jesus says that the Father's power was given to him so that "they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Jesus continues in prayer, reminding the Father that he had prepared those whom he had received to carry on his work. He specifically noted that he was not just thinking about the initial 12, but also all those who would be called.

When placed together with passages such as Matthew 28:18-20, we get a clear picture of what our Owner wants to see come from our labour on his behalf. Simply put, the desired result is people, once under the penalty of death, now redeemed and alive in Christ.

Do it yourself?

Over the last several centuries the approach to mission could be summed up in the old saying, "If you want something done, you've got to do it yourself." There was no one else. So Western Christians, who had been the recipient of the gospel handed down from the apostles, had to set aside their normal lives and devote themselves to bringing the gospel of Christ to those who had no way of receiving Christ without them.

Papua New Guinea

The quintessential example of this to me is a professor of mine, who in the 1960s went into the jungles of Papua New Guinea to a newly discovered tribe of active cannibals. He, his young wife and baby daughter moved into a village with the goal of bringing Christ to these primitive peoples.

Problem was, there was no Bible in the local language. To make matters worse, he didn't know their language and had no one to teach him. To complicate matters even more, the people did not have a written language. He had to learn their language by osmosis, create an alphabet, teach them to read their own language and then translate the Bible into that manufactured language.

God worked mightily, and to this day there are strong Christian communities among those tribes (for a fascinating account of this undertaking you can read the book *Kandila*, by Daniel Shaw). Daniel's experience was extreme, but it makes the point. We rightfully carried the gospel to the whole world by going. There was no other way.

Things have changed

In the last 15 to 20 years (it is difficult to pinpoint), God has produced a bountiful harvest. Now, across the Second and Third Worlds, millions of converted, devout and committed Christians are wholeheartedly bringing Christ to the nations.

In some cases these Christians are in a time of first love—and their enthusiasm and zeal is infectious.

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New mission focus

It is hard to find a major people group on earth without an indigenous harvest force ready and able to carry the gospel to their people. Here's the point: In most cases, these people can do this job more effectively than us, and at a fraction of the cost that it takes for a

Western missionary.

What they lack are resources. Our role as good stewards of Christ's gifts to us should be focused on meeting their need for resources—not on doing their local mission work ourselves.

If Western Christians want to see the most Second and Third World people come to a meaningful relationship with Christ, then we must become providers of resources instead of "doing it ourselves." Local believers do the most effective evangelism, not short visits from outsiders.

Role of short-term mission trips

Does that mean that we should avoid Second and Third World short-term missions?

Not at all! Such trips are an excellent way to celebrate and take part in what God is doing in a given place.

The experience can be life altering. I heartily recommend visiting and if possible participating in such a mission effort. But let's not make the mistake of thinking that participation in a short-term mission trip is the most effective stewardship of mission resources. It can be a blessing to those who do it and an encouragement to the local believers who are actually doing the mission work. But it should not be thought of as the primary way for us to "do our part" in international mission work.

How to best help

Keep in mind that the Owner wants results. The short-term mission experience should be a supplement to—a celebration of—the real work of mission, which is carried out by local believers.

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THE WORK OF MISSION

Bangladeshis need the Lord—badly! Here are 42 Bangladeshi brothers and sisters—Gospel Workers. They know their people well—their culture, language, hopes and fears.

Local mission work

In May alone, these 42 Gospel Workers conducted 442 Bible studies (in the Bengali language) and 277 small group worship meetings. They also identified the poorest of the poor in their area and gave them a goat to help release them from economic oppression. They trained women in basic health care to show the compassion of Christ. They have virtually no resources.

Short-term mission trip

Here is a devoted American Christian. She wants to have a meaningful role in kingdom work. She plans to go on a short-term mission to Bangladesh. The experience will be good for her. Some poor people will get new roofs to help protect them from the elements. Her congregation is excited, too—at last they can spend their mission money in a way that they can see—she'll bring back stories and pictures.

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Comparison

It costs this one Westerner about \$3,350 to make this two-week mission exposure trip.

Consider this: If the Westerner had raised the same amount of money to help provide resources for the mission work of the local believers, it would have bought enough goats to permanently raise nearly 100 widows from poverty to sufficiency, trained about 40 nurses or supported a number of new full-time Gospel Workers.

Conclusion: We can be more effective stewards as providers of resources to those who can now more effectively do what Westerners previously had to do. There is a place for spending money on short-term mission trips (I like to call them "exposure opportunities"), but when it comes to Second and Third World mission work, our part is in resourcing the mission work of the local believers.

Note: As we were working on this edition, we learned that the worst monsoon rains and flooding in six years have covered 60 percent of Bangladesh, destroying crops and jobs. The nation will need food aid for 20 million people over the next five months. Starvation seems unlikely, however, because of international aid.

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Cocoon or Community

Some believers struggle to belong to the church

By George Hague;
Illustrations by Bruce Hedges

It's hard to let down your defences and, more or less, give up some sovereignty, and give a minister, or a group, a certain measure of power over your life. — Letter from a friend

My friend has a problem. He would like to attend a church, but is hesitant about formally associating with one. His struggle is not unique.

Here is a dilemma that confronts a growing number of people: to cocoon—to be your own church and spiritual authority— or to join a congregation and surrender some of that independence to a religious community.

Believers, not belongers

"People who consider becoming involved in a congregation," writes Wade Clark Roof, "often experience a fundamental clash of two conflicting yearnings: on the one hand to hold on to one's own individuality, and on the other, to be a part of a larger faith community." Dr. Roof, a professor of religion and society at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is the author of *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. Dr. Roof and his associates interviewed 2,620 people in California, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Ohio. Gradually, they narrowed the scope of their interviews to 64 people, all born between 1946 and 1962.

The study verified what many people, not only those in the generation under study, already knew about themselves: They would like to commit to a church, but not at the price of their independence and autonomy. According to Dr. Roof, the 1960s and 1970s deeply affected people's religious convictions. After the 14-year-long Vietnam War, cinched by the long, hot summer of the Watergate hearings, people's perceptions and respect for government and authority had eroded.

Institutions of any kind—banks, public schools, the military and organized religion—all became suspect. In addition, if people already had a bad experience with a church, or even knew a friend or relative who had a bad experience, they often cut all ties with formal religion. Yet, as Dr. Roof's studies show, even as people left the churches, spiritual yearning and hunger remained. These conflicting interests gave rise to the

tension between wanting to belong to a church and fearing commitment to it.

Bible accepted

Ironically, despite distrusting organized religion, 71 percent of Americans born after the mid-1960s either "agree strongly" or "agree somewhat" that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. (The number is slightly higher for those people born between 1946 and 1964.)

George Barna, a leading pollster and president of Barna Research Group, Ltd., extensively surveys and researches the American religious scene. His research group asked 1,005 people to respond to the statement, "The Bible is the written word of God and is totally accurate in all it teaches." The respondents could have replied in one of five ways: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree or don't know. Of those interviewed, 47 percent strongly agreed and 24 percent somewhat agreed. Surprisingly, more than half of non-churchgoers agreed, even though people who seldom, if ever, attend church read the Bible for moral guidance and inspiration.

Yet, there is an inherent contradiction in accepting the Bible and rejecting the church. The entire New Testament is written by members of the church and is addressed to the church community. Most of Paul's epistles formally address the church communities: "To the church of God in Corinth..." "To the church of the Thessalonians..." "To the churches in Galatia..."

Jesus Christ inspired the apostles and evangelists to address the needs of that community through their written words. Jesus also inspired the church to preserve those words for the community's use through the ages. To deny the importance of community is to ignore the original purpose of the Scriptures—to teach the community as a whole.

Idealism vs. reality

Yet, in addition to the conflicting desires of cocoon and community, something else often holds back believers who are not belongers. Ironically, it is their own expectations of the church.

The English author W. Somerset Maugham wrote a short story titled "Mirage." It's about an Englishman who, during his career in the Far East, dreamed of retiring to his native London. After 25 years, the man finally returned, only to be sorely disappointed. The

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city had changed, and his friends had moved on. After a frustrating year and a half, he resolved to return to Shanghai, a city he now remembered with fondness. He never made it back. Instead, on his return, he stopped short in a wretched town, squandering his last years dreaming of returning to Shanghai. He didn't finish his journey because he couldn't bear to see his expectations disappointed again.

Leith Anderson, a pastor in Minnesota, says in his book *"Dying for Change"* that the consumer-driven economy has raised people's expectations of churches, perhaps to unrealistic levels. These high expectations can cause people to bounce between different congregations, looking for their dream church.

They are like the man in the Somerset Maugham story. Their expectations are so high they can never be met, only disappointed. In their struggle not to settle for anything less than their ideal, some are paralyzed by their expectations and never go anywhere.

Our community, ourselves

A bumper sticker back in the 1970s encouraging people to become politically involved read, "If you didn't vote, don't yell." As Christians, our expectations of a church should go hand in hand with our willingness to commit and participate in the congregation. If we want to be part of something bigger than ourselves, then we must be willing to help create it. We have to participate, in spite of disappointments and annoyances.

With this approach, committing to a church is not a surrender to a community, but a joining in partnership with it. With this approach comes the healthy understanding that a church cannot fill your every spiritual need. Christian spiritual growth comes from personally accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, of committing to and experiencing the community of faith, taking time for individual Bible study, prayer and reflection. These elements together, both the personal and the communal, lead to lasting spiritual growth and maturity.

With the encouragement of fellow Christians, whom we know from church, we find our personal growth is strengthened. That personal growth in turn enables us to encourage other Christians who are experiencing stress and spiritual lows.

Fellowship

From the beginning of the New Testament church, Christians understood the importance of worshiping as a community. In the book of Acts, when Christians worshiped together, they called it fellowship. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

In those first euphoric days of the church, the members continuously celebrated the grace and salvation they received through Jesus Christ. "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (verses 44-45).

Gradually, however, everyone had to return to the routine of normal life. People had to get back to making their livings. Though the euphoria subsided, their fellowship did not. They continued meeting together for worship and for sharing their Christian experiences. Fellowship was an essential part of their faith. The benefits of this fellowship were perhaps most clearly seen during times of distress.

The book of Hebrews was written to a congregation that had experienced persecution, including imprisonment and confiscation of its property (Hebrews 10:33-34). Understandably, the congregation was experiencing a spiritual low. Some members stopped attending services.

The author of Hebrews, wanting to encourage and strengthen the members of the congregation, reminded them of Jesus' atoning work on the cross and of his continuing intercession for them as High Priest in heaven. The author then wrote: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (verses 24-25).

Without worshiping together, these Christians would have continued their spiritual depression. Only by meeting together were they able to encourage each other to follow the Christian walk. Their individual relationships to the church—to each other—were mutually beneficial and even essential.

Spiritual gifts

Thus, Christians not only receive the benefits of the church, but they also are responsible for helping, improving and building their congregation. Perhaps one week *you* do not need a kind word or a sympathetic ear, but somebody else does. With the grace of salvation comes the responsibility to help our fellow Christians.

To fulfil our responsibilities to the community of faith, God gives us the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts vary according to a person's talents and personality and according to the needs of a specific congregation. God distributes these gifts throughout the church. The question is not if you have any of the gifts of the Spirit, the question is, "Which gifts do you have?". "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us," wrote Paul (Romans 12:6).

Some people have the gift to teach adults, others to teach children. Some people know how to say just the

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right word to those who are discouraged, or even better yet, how to listen to them. Other people know how to show hospitality, still others how to serve the needy. (You may want to study the gifts of the Holy Spirit in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 to learn which ones God has given you. Through attending church and getting involved in its work, you can learn how to apply them.) God's distribution of the gifts of the Holy Spirit enables us to help each other and learn from each other. God shows us, no matter what our personal strength or

desire for independence, that we need one another. The British author C.S. Lewis wrote. "Christianity thinks of human individuals not as mere members of a group or items in a list, but as organs in a body—different from one another, and each contributing what no other could" (*Mere Christianity*, page 159).

Church just isn't the same without you there.

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What Jesus' parables reveal

By Norman L. Shoaf

About one third of Jesus Christ's recorded teachings are in the form of parables.

What do they mean?

The Good Samaritan. The pearl of great price. Counting the cost. The Good Shepherd. New wine in old wineskins. The prodigal son. Sheep and goats. Who hasn't heard of at least a couple of these? Jesus' New Testament parables are among the most powerful ideas in Western civilization!

These lessons are at the core of Christ's teaching. Nearly 2,000 years after Jesus gave them, his parables still sparkle with simple yet sublime insights about life—and startling yet comforting revelations about God's kingdom. But what, exactly, are parables? And what did Jesus intend that we learn from his parables?

Understand the genre

First, let's understand that the Bible consists of different types of writing. As we read and study the Bible, we should recognize each type of genre, or in other words, literary style. You wouldn't read a recipe for lasagne as you would a suicide note. A court summons is no comic strip. Subway graffiti does not a thank-you card make. A love letter is not an encyclopaedia article. They are different types of writing, produced by different authors for different audiences. They also invite different responses.

Were parables used to hide the truth?

Mark 4:10-12 is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. These verses, with parallels in Matthew 13:10-15 and Luke 8:9-10, indicate that Jesus wanted to hide truth as well as reveal it. Mark 4 opens, "He taught them [a crowd] many things by parables" (verse 2). The chapter then relates the parable of the sower (verses 3-8).

Jesus' disciples didn't get the point. When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven" (verses 10-12). Here Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9-10.

Is the kingdom of God a secret, given only to a chosen few? Did Jesus tell his parables, which seem so simple, so accessible and so timeless, to keep outsiders from understanding the truth? Does God not want to forgive sinners?

No one can come to Christ unless first drawn by God the Father (John 6:44). Yet God does not want "anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). In fact, God "commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). The explanation of the parable has in fact been published in the Bible, so that everyone can read it.

Jesus directed the story of the sower to each listener "who has ears to hear" (Mark 4:9). Jesus' message demands that we respond. "This is the one I esteem," God says, "he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2). But not everyone approaches the truth of God in the same manner.

Jesus intended that people understand the parable of the sower. After all, he went right on to explain it (Mark 4:14-20). Different people respond differently when confronted with the truth. Some of the sown

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seed (representing the Word of God) is eaten by birds (snatched away by Satan). Some falls on shallow soil and fails to survive in the hot sun (hearers not rooted in the truth). Some is choked by thorns (cares of this life). But some of the seed falls on good soil and produces a crop (hearers who accept God's truth and produces spiritual fruit).

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia says: "Jesus' teaching confronted people with radical demands, and not all were willing to comply. Some followed Him in discipleship, but others were actually driven further from the Kingdom.... It is not intellectual but volitional blindness and deafness that is in view" (vol. 3, page 657).

Jesus' listeners saw salvation personified in Jesus, the Son of God. They heard the most important message ever preached. Yet most didn't understand—they failed to believe and become converted! Matthew 13 includes this episode at the point when Jesus began to concentrate on private teaching of his disciples, rather than public preaching. John 12:40 quotes Isaiah 6:10 at this same point.

Jesus' message was not well received by hard-hearted people. What kind of heart do you have to hear the Saviour of the world?

Many types of writing make up the Bible. Parables, or parabolic passages, concentrated in the Gospels, are one of those genres. The Bible also contains legal codes, such as those you can read in the books of Moses. You will find poetry in the psalms and elsewhere. There are also prophecies, histories, hymns, letters and speeches in the Bible. There are allegories, metaphors, similes, epics, riddles and wise sayings. Bible students call yet other sections didactic, apocalyptic and eschatological. They are all inspired by God. They are "God-breathed" and "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that those who belong to God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

But we need to see these different literary genres—parables included—for what they are, in their contexts. We need to learn as much as we can about who wrote them, and why, and to whom. Legal codes and delicate poetry are different. Sweeping epics are not science texts. Letters may whisper personal details about their writers even as they defy being used to nail down historical or prophetic dates. Metaphors aren't meant literally. Failure to understand the literary style can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. How, then, should we look at Jesus' parables?

The background to Jesus' parables

Jesus' parables have been called "heavenly stories with earthly meanings," or "earthly stories with heavenly meanings." But there is more to them than

that. Both the Hebrew word *masal* and the Greek *parabole* are broadly used of proverbs, allegories, riddles, illustrations and stories. They can refer to any striking speech formulated to stimulate thought.

Interpreter C.H. Dodd, in his 1935 classic *Parables of the Kingdom*, defined a parable as "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought" (page 16). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states that parables are "almost always formulated to reveal and illustrate the kingdom of God" (vol. 3, page 656).

Parables are present, but not common, in the Old Testament. Perhaps the parable that most closely resembles Jesus' parables is Nathan's story of the pet lamb, which moved King David to repent (2 Samuel 12:1-13). Judges 9:8-15 and 2 Kings 14:9 symbolize kings and nations as talking plants and a wild beast; these passages are more like fables.

Was Jesus thinking of Ezekiel 17:22-24 when he told the parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32 and parallel passages)? His parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-9) echoes Isaiah 5:1-7 (the song of the vineyard). Jesus' parables often referred to nature to picture the spectacular growth of God's kingdom from a small beginning.

Outside the Gospels, the Greek *parabole* appears in the New Testament only in Hebrews 9:9, where the New King James Version says the tabernacle (verse 8) and sacrifices were "symbolic" for the present time, and in Hebrews 11:19, which says that Abraham, "figuratively speaking," received Isaac back from death after proving he was willing to sacrifice his son.

Jesus' teaching was unique

Early rabbis included parables in their writings. These parables began or ended with, and explained, Old Testament texts. Jesus' use of parables differed markedly. "The NT parables," notes *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, "almost never function in this way [to explain Old Testament passages]: Jesus came not to exegete Scripture, but to reveal the new age of God's kingdom" (ibid.).

Thus, as we saw above, Jesus Christ's "nature parables" (for example, the mustard seed) showed how God's kingdom would start small but become all encompassing. The kingdom's present aspects would seem unspectacular, its ultimate realization amazing.

His "discovery parables" (the hidden treasure, Matthew 13:44; or the pearl of great price, verses 45-46) show that God's kingdom is so valuable we can happily abandon all else for it. His "contrast parables" (the rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31; or the Pharisee and the tax collector, Luke 18:9-14) illuminate how much God loves even the lost and

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dispossessed and welcomes them into fellowship with him.

The "a fortiori parables"—those that ask "How much more..." (The friend at midnight, Luke 11:5-8; or the persistent widow, Luke 18:1-8)—show how much God can be trusted to act righteously. If even humans won't act in certain evil ways, Jesus asked, "How much more will your Father in heaven give...?" (Luke 11:13).

"The parables focus on God and his kingdom and in doing so reveal what kind of God he is, by what principles he works, and what he expects of humanity," comments the *Baker Encyclopaedia of the Bible* (vol. 2, page 1609).

Jesus' use of parables was so masterful, and the kingdom-centered message of his parables so revolutionary, that no other New Testament personality tried to copy this aspect of his teaching. The uniqueness of Jesus' parables bolsters their place at the core of our Saviour's message for humanity.

Even critics as extreme as those who make up the Jesus Seminar, who discard much of the Gospels as fabrications by early Christians, believe that in the simple, moving and transcendently beautiful messages of the parables we come as close to the historical Jesus as we are likely to get.

Hearing Jesus' message

Jesus was a master storyteller. His parables contain striking images, dramatic action and bold character development, all built around universal themes that have touched people for two millennia. Yet the parables offer minimal detail. Often Jesus provided no clear explanations for the stories, leaving them open to multiple interpretations through the ages. So how can we know what the parables of Jesus mean? Some interpreters make the mistake of reading more into some parables than Jesus ever intended. In the other ditch are those who fail to catch what some parables clearly emphasize.

Until this century, most interpreters *allegorized* the parables. This means they looked for symbolic significance in as many details in the stories as possible. Augustine (A.D. 354-430), an early church father, explained the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) in this way:

The man going down from Jerusalem pictured Adam leaving the peaceful place that was Eden. The robbers who beat him were the devil and his demons, who persuaded Adam to sin. The priest and the Levite (the Law and the Prophets) offered the victim no help, but the Samaritan (Christ) rescued him, pouring oil and wine (comfort and exhortation) onto the man's wounds. The donkey on which the Samaritan, or Christ, placed the man symbolized the church: the apostle Paul was the innkeeper. This is going too far, reading into the parable far more detail than Jesus intended (Paul was not even a Christian yet!)

By contrast, many modern interpreters have abandoned the allegorical approach. They try to reject the temptation to read their own ideas into the parables, which they believe has led to centuries of abuse of Jesus' message. These interpreters believe that each parable has only one main point. Others argue that a parable might make up to three main points, one for each of the main characters in the story.

This was the case, they point out, with parables in classical Greek literature, and this is how Jesus' listeners, in the culture of his day, would have looked at his parables. This view sees the parable of the good Samaritan simply as an exhortation to imitate the Samaritan's outgoing concern for his neighbour. This interpretation seems consistent with the explanation Jesus himself gave for this parable (verse 37).

The story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is another example. It's hard to wrench from this parable exact details about the afterlife. Jesus was drawing on images from Jewish and Egyptian folklore, which his listeners would have realized, to show the gulf between arrogant people in this world and those who by humble submission to God come to be in the kingdom of God.

Many modern Bible students try not to over-interpret the parables. Nevertheless, they believe Jesus gave some details not just to add spice to his stories, but to make important points.

Let the parables speak to you

If we want to understand God's Word, we need to let the parables speak to our day with vigour and importance. "Parables require their hearers to pass judgment on the events of the story and having done so to realize that they must make a similar judgment in their own lives," states the *Baker Encyclopaedia of the Bible* (vol. 2, page 1609).

How can you judge your own life by hearing the messages of Jesus' parables? Study each parable thoroughly, laying aside any preconceived idea of what you think it says—or that you would like it to say. Look at the context in which you find the parable. Doing so may offer clues about its meaning. (But understand that the Gospels often record Jesus' parables without telling exactly when he gave them, or to whom, or why.)

Take note of the "rule of end stress." The climax—and point—of most parables comes at the end. Look for principles that reveal what God is like, what his kingdom is all about, how he wants to relate to humanity—and how he expects us to respond to him.

What does the parable tell you about your relationship with God and Christ? The answers you find to this question are the most important points of truth in the

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Bible, for, as Jesus said. "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

How does God want a citizen of his kingdom to behave? All of Jesus' parables contain parts of the answer to this question, for the present and future realities of the kingdom of God are what Christ's life, work, message, death, resurrection and High Priesthood are all about.

What is your attitude toward that kingdom? "Again," Jesus said in a parable, "the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46).

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Reading Through Romans

Christians and the Government

A study of Romans 13

In Romans 12, Paul wrote that we should be living sacrifices, transformed in our minds so that we please God and do his will. Paul described the attitudes that should characterize believers: humility, service, love and peace. In chapter 13, Paul gets specific about how a Christian should respond to civil authorities.

Submission to civil government

Paul writes, Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established (13:1). Rulers have sometimes used this verse to tell their citizens to obey, but many citizens have rightly wondered if this is what Paul meant, because rulers sometimes tell people to sin. Paul himself once had authority that he used to persecute the church, so how can he say that all authority comes from God?

Remember the context—Paul has just written several verses about how we should respond to evil, and he concludes, "Overcome evil with good" (12:21). Although government authority is established by God, and is good in itself, it is sometimes used in an evil way. Christians should not fight against the government, repaying evil for evil, but are to respond with good behaviour.

Paul is giving a general principle, not writing about specific rulers. We do not subject ourselves to specific people, or pay taxes to specific people—rather, we submit to the office, and when a new person is in office, we submit to the new person, not the old one. Once a person is out of office, we do not owe that person any allegiance or payments. The "authorities" that Paul writes about are roles, not specific people. "Submit" does not always mean, "obey," but it usually does, and Christians should be willing to obey civil authority. If the government commands a sin, then we have to disobey (Acts 5:29)—but that does not mean that we can fight against the government on other

issues. We do not conform to the world (12:2), but neither do we try to overthrow it.

When Paul wrote this, he was planning to visit Jerusalem, where there were many political tensions. Jewish Zealots were taking up weapons to fight against Rome. There were also political difficulties in Rome: Jews had been involved in so many disturbances that Claudius had forced them to leave (Acts 18:2). After Claudius died, many Jews returned, but the tensions were still there.

Paul knows that his advice will not be accepted automatically, so he supports it with theological principles: God has established the authorities that exist. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted (vv. 1-2).

If Caesar demands to be called "Lord and God" (as Domitian did a few decades after Paul wrote), Christians should refuse, even at risk of their lives. But there is a big difference between refusing to obey one law, and a rebellion that claims that Caesar should not rule. It is not wrong to resist specific injustices, but it is wrong to work against government itself. Those who rebel against a God-ordained authority will bring judgment on themselves. Civil government is temporary and God established it, (Dan. 4:17; John 19:11). It is not our place to try to overthrow the government.

Paul is writing about a dictatorial government, not a democracy. In a democracy, all citizens are given a small amount of authority each time they vote, and it is not a sin for people to use that authority. They are not rebelling against the government even if they are voting for a new person to fill the office. Quite the contrary: they are supporting the government by participating in it.

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Nero, servant of God

Then Paul explains how rebels might be punished: For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong (v. 3). Empires are built on the blood of thousands of innocent victims. Jesus himself was killed by the Roman government. But when civil rulers are performing their God-ordained role, they are a threat to evildoers, not to those who obey the laws.

Paul is giving a general principle, not addressing all the confusing situations that sin creates. He does not say what we should do in a civil war, or when the rulers are so corrupt that they terrorize good people and support criminals.

Paul asks; do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended (v. 3). If you are a law-abiding citizen, you should have no reason to fear the government. (However, governments sometimes go awry and persecute Christians. Revelation 13, using imagery from Daniel, depicts civil government as a terrifying “beast.”)

Paul then makes the astonishing statement: For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good (v. 4). When Paul wrote Romans, Nero was the emperor. In his early years, he was a good ruler. But he turned evil, and tradition says that Paul was executed under his reign. But Paul calls him the minister of God! The fact that rulers often sin, even serving Satan at times, does not change the fact that God designed those roles to be used for good.

But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer (v. 4). Civil rulers serve God by bearing the sword, Paul says. They have authority from God to execute rebels. Genesis 9:6 authorises capital punishment for murder. God authorized even imperfect governments to administer the death penalty to punish and deter crime.

God has the authority to punish evil (12:19), and he delegates that authority to civil rulers. Personal vengeance is wrong, but civil rulers have the God-assigned responsibility to punish evil. When we report crime to the police, we are seeking the justice that God has designed. Since God wants civil justice, it is permissible for a Christian to serve on the police force, or as a judge, or on a jury, doing what God has declared good, punishing crime not for our own vengeance, but acting on behalf of the civil government that God has authorized.

Paul concludes, Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience (v. 5). We should obey civil laws not only because the civil government might punish us if we don’t, but also

because God wants us to be law-abiding people (cf. 1 Peter 2:12-14).

Taxes, too

Paul then moves from general principles to the more specific matter of taxes: This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing (v. 6). Since civil rulers have a legitimate, God-ordained function, it is right for us to pay taxes to support this service. Rulers are never perfect, but they are still worthy of their wages, and God does not want us to rebel against that role.

Nero changed the tax system in A.D. 58 because of a widespread outcry against the greed of the tax collectors. Paul wrote shortly before that, when the resentment was growing. But a tax revolt would be bad for the Christian community. Paul did not want the believers to be associated with rebellion—especially when Christ himself had been executed for anti-government activity in Judea! Such a reputation would make it difficult for Paul to spread the gospel.

Just as Paul began this section with a comment about what “everyone” should do, he concludes with a command for everyone: Give to everyone what you owe: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour (v. 7). Taxes are a debt that should be paid, he implies. We should also pay customs duties, commissions, royalty fees and other obligations spelled out by law. We also have intangible obligations: to respect and honour government officials (Acts 23:5; 1 Peter 2:17)—not for their private lives, but for their God-ordained role of restraining evil.

Since we should respond to evil with good, blessing even those who persecute us (12:14-21), in most situations we should cooperate with civil authorities, since they have a God-ordained function in society. The basic Christian ethic is not to fight for our own benefit, but to do good to others.

Paul’s own experience with the government is an example of a balanced approach. When he was on trial for his life in Judea, he was respectful, but he did not passively submit to whatever the rulers wanted. Rather, he used his rights as a Roman citizen to prevent a flogging (Acts 22:25) and to prevent being sent back to Jerusalem (25:11).

The government gave citizens the right of appeal because they knew that their officials sometimes made wrong decisions, and when Paul used his rights, he was not submissive to the specific person in front of him, but he was submissive to the governmental system. In the same way, Christians today can use their rights as citizens to request changes in government policy, including changes in personnel. Voting is not a sign of disrespect, but is an opportunity to use some of the civil authority that God has authorized.

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The law of love

After saying that we should pay whatever we owe, Paul shifts the subject back to love through a play on words; let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another... 13:8; 12:9-10). Love is the most basic Christian ethic. We will always need to love one another; it is an eternal obligation.

Why? Because whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The way this is written, the logic could imply that "the law" is the primary goal, and love is a stepping-stone toward that goal. But more accurately, love is the goal, and the law provides guidance about how we are to love. Paul then gives some examples of harmful behaviours we should avoid:

The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (13:9; cf. Matt. 22:36). These commandments are not a complete guide to love—they specify a few things to avoid. Written commandments can never be a complete guide to love. Human situations are too diverse for rules to be written about all possibilities. However, the law guides us—it is impossible to love our neighbour while violating these commandments.

Paul is dealing with laws about how we interact with other people—he is not saying how we should show love to God. Most of the old covenant laws about worship are obsolete.

Love does no harm to its neighbour, Paul says—but love must go further than simply avoiding harm—it should actively seek to do *good* to the neighbour. Paul is summarizing the function of the commandments he quoted. He concludes; Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law (v. 10). If we love others, we have fulfilled the purpose of the law—and have gone further than what it requires. If we love our neighbour, we should pay our taxes. Even if the government is evil, we

should respond to evil by doing good, not by taking matters into our own hands.

Clothed in Christ

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy (v. 13). The Roman Christians were probably not involved in debauchery, but judging from chapter 14, they probably *were* involved in dissension and jealousy. By grouping these vices together, Paul is implying that competitive attitudes within the congregation are just as inappropriate as debauchery. The church is to be a community of brothers and sisters, not a place where one person vies against another.

Paul then gives the alternative: Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature (v. 14). Drunkenness and immorality come from the sinful nature; so do jealousy and dissension. Neither is appropriate for people who give their allegiance to Jesus Christ. When we clothe ourselves with him, imitating him, cooperation and mutual esteem will replace selfishness.

Questions for application

- Pontius Pilate ordered the death of an innocent man. Would Paul have given Pilate as much respect as he gave Festus and Felix? When might Paul refuse to obey?
- A government has the right to execute criminals. However, does it have a right to use lethal force to pursue criminals who are being protected by another nation?
- What might Paul say about the American War of Independence, which began as a protest against taxation?
- How does the law of love (v. 10) apply to our relationship with God? What does it command, and what does it prohibit?
- When we are saved by grace, why is important that we "behave decently"? (v. 13)

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Lessons from the Bible

The Gospel of Mark,

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LESSON 17: MARK 3: 7 - 12

A Lesson About Appearances

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was.

Things are not always as they appear. That was certainly the case with Jesus. The crowd saw a miracle-worker, a remarkable man of God who could heal their diseases. They had come from all over the region, and the crowd was so thick that Jesus had a boat ready in case the crowd pressed him into the Sea of Galilee.

Crowds

Crowds are funny. Crowds don't have brains like people do. Crowds can't reason—they can only react, somewhat like an animal reacts. There may be voices of reason in a crowd, of course, but those voices are ordinarily as effective as shouting during a thunderclap.

Ecstatic crowds have been known to stampede and trample people at soccer matches. Such crowds have even, at times, crushed their own players in a mindless rush of bodies. Angry crowds have destroyed property and murdered people. People in crowds often suspend good judgment and do things they would never do if they were alone and thinking.

Crowds can be thrilled one moment and furious the next. Crowds are unpredictable, and for that reason, potentially dangerous. Evil people can stir up crowds to do evil things. Likewise, good people can calm crowds and set the people in the crowd back to straight thinking. A town clerk once did that in Ephesus, which saved Paul's life (see Acts 19:24-41).

Jesus knew about crowds. He took precautions, but he also knew that his time had not yet come. He knew he would be killed, but that evening at the shore of Galilee was not the time or the place. The time would be the season of Passover, and the place would be Jerusalem.

'Son of God'

The crowd saw Jesus as a healer of diseases. The demons saw something else. "You are the Son of god," they called out. Jesus ordered them to be silent. It might appear that the term "Son of God" would have meant the same thing to that first-century crowd as it means to us today. It didn't. "Son of God" had several meanings in the ancient world. In gentile nations, it was not uncommon for kings to bear the title "son of

god." Kings of Egypt were "sons of Ra," an Egyptian god. Many Roman emperors held the title, "son of god."

In the Old Testament, however, the term "son of God" referred to someone especially near to God. For example, angels were referred to as "sons of God" (Job 1:6). Israel itself was called the "son of God" (Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1). God referred to the king of Israel as "my son" (2 Samuel 7:14). The king is referred to as the "son of God" in the second Psalm—"You are my son; today I have begotten you."

Messiah

The demons knew that Jesus was especially dear to God. Maybe they even knew he was Emmanuel—God with us, or as John put it, "the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), or as in Hebrews, the Son by whom God made all things (Hebrews 1:2), the express image of God's person (verse 3). In any case, Jesus told them to be silent.

Why didn't Jesus want people to know who he was? Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the anointed one, the king, the Son of David, the Son of God. But God's idea of Messiahship was radically different from the crowd's idea of Messiahship. Grace and truth, sacrifice and love were the marks of authentic Messiahship. But a conquering king with mighty armies overthrowing the Romans and leading Israel to national greatness was the Messiah the crowd wanted.

A crowd praised Jesus on Palm Sunday. A week later, a crowd, stirred up by evil men, demanded his execution. Jesus wasn't what the Messiah watchers were looking for. [He had the popularity. He had the people's imagination and loyalty. He had the charisma. He had the devotion and support of God, as witnessed by his miracles.

But to the most zealous of the Messiah watchers, to men like Judas, it became more and more evident that Jesus was a fraud, a stubborn fool who for whatever reason would not declare himself and take the reins of leadership. To them, Jesus was a supreme disappointment—a man who could have restored the fortunes of Israel but wouldn't—a man who only

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appeared to be the chosen of God, a charlatan who was merely giving the people a cruel, false hope.

Saviour

Jesus was not the Messiah they had been waiting for. Instead, he was far more than they could have ever dared dream or hope. He was more than they were yet capable of comprehending. He was YHWH himself, Immanuel, God With Us, come to his people as one of them, come to humanity as one of us all, come to deliver us all from the greatest oppression of all, come to restore us all to the household of God.

Mel Gibson's movie about the crucifixion of Jesus has sparked debate over whether the Jews killed Jesus. The debate itself belies ignorance of who Jesus was and why he came.

Jesus was a Jew, sent to his own people to be rejected by his own people (John 1:11). Yet others of his own received him (verse 12). Jesus was sent for the sake not only of Israel, but for the sake of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Does it make sense to blame Israel for being God's chosen people? To do so is to blame God for choosing Israel—for choosing Israel as his precious instrument for their vital part in the ultimate salvation of the world. Jesus was the representative of all Israel, the true and faithful Israelite for the sake of all Israel, and it is as the perfect Israelite that Jesus represents before God all people in the world.

Every human is to "blame" for the crucifixion of Jesus, because every human has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). But Jesus gave himself freely, not because anyone "made" him, or because he "had" to. He did it because he loves humanity. It was God's free grace toward undeserving sinners that led to Jesus' crucifixion—undeserving sinners like you and me. The crowd that shouted, "Crucify him!" were no bigger sinners than those of us who sing "That Old Rugged Cross" on Easter morning. "Father, forgive them..." Jesus said. And the Father did.

Blame game

Would Christians who "blame" Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus prefer that Jesus not have been crucified? Would they prefer that he not have shed his blood for the sins of humanity and been raised from the dead? Jesus said of his life: "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father" (John 10:18).

Jesus' crucifixion was God's will, Jesus' will. God loved the world—Jews and gentiles alike—so much, that he sent his "only begotten" (King James Version), or "one and only" (NIV) Son to save the world by dying and rising from the dead (John 3:16). There is no sense, no logic, no Christian love, in the historical epithet "Christ-killers" that some "Christians"

have levelled at Jews. Every human bears responsibility, Jew and gentile alike, for the death of Jesus, and thank God for it; it is through this self-sacrificial means, this supreme expression of divine love and intimacy with humanity, that God has saved us all and restored us to fellowship with him and with each other.

He is risen! The Jesus who in his rejection by us all cried out, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing," is the same Jesus who rose in glory and is our Advocate with the Father. He is the same Jesus whose Spirit moves us to love one another as he commanded.

Blame the Jews for killing Jesus? Blame anyone for killing Jesus? Nothing could be farther from the heart of Jesus than setting blame, for all humanity is to blame, and in Jesus, all humanity is forever forgiven for all sin. For this purpose he came, and for this purpose he lives that we all might live in him, blameless before God.

Appearances

It was an otherwise ordinary day by the sea. Except for the crowd, the healings and the shouting demons. When it was over, the people went home. They went back to work. They weren't part of a crowd any more. They were people again; they could think and reason again.

They wondered about that day at the sea. They wondered who that amazing man was who healed the sick. They talked about him in their towns. He had inspired a sense of hope in them, whoever he was. Some said he was John the Baptist, come back to life. Others said the great prophet Elijah had returned. But things are not always as they appear. The day would come when they would hear of this man again. And what they would hear would change everything.

Maybe you need to see beyond appearances too. It might appear to you that your sins have the better of you. It might appear to you that God is fed up with you, sick and tired of your falling short, ready to spew you out of his mouth and wash his hands of you.

Things are not what they appear. God loves you and always will. Christ died for us, Paul says, while we were still sinners (Romans 5:10). Jesus didn't wait until you were behaving better before he loved you and saved you. Sin doesn't stand between God and you—God already took that barrier away. That means you can stop worrying and trust him. He loves you, he saved you and he'll never let you go.

Don't believe the lies your sins tell you—despite what your sins say, God does still love you, and he won't ever turn his back on you. So why not take your struggles with sin to him—in faith that he's already forgiven you—and trust him to help you become more like him? He's right beside you.

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Study Supplement No. 25

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