

The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary. By Arland J. Hultgren. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, pp. xxix + 522, \$35.00.

This volume appears in a new series being published by Eerdmans entitled "The Bible in Its World." Hultgren is professor of NT at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota and is well-known for his other scholarly publications. In this work he provides a commentary on thirty-eight parables in the synoptic gospels. The book begins with an introduction to the parables. Hultgren then divides the parables into seven different categories, with chapters that explain the parables that fit under the category under discussion. The parables are classified as follows: those that reveal God, exemplary parables, parables of wisdom, parables of life before God, parables of final judgment, allegorical parables, and parables of the kingdom. In some cases I question whether a parable is placed in the best category, but in every case the decisions Hultgren makes are defensible and his classification is useful and even heuristic. After the chapters on the various kinds of parables, two chapters on the evangelists as interpreters of the parables and parables in the Gospel of Thomas are included. Three appendices are added on various features of the parables.

This volume should prove to be very helpful for students and pastors. In the commentary section Hultgren translates the parable in question, adds some technical notes on text and translation, analyzes the parable with an exegetical commentary, summarizes the text with an exposition, and concludes with a bibliography. The author has the knack for including what is important, and his writing is beautifully lucid. The book is stocked with fresh insights and even pastoral wisdom about the meaning of the

parables. Hultgren has read widely in the literature (the bibliography for each parable alone is almost worth the price of the book), and yet he retains his own independence as a commentator. I was struck by how often he casts light upon the parables by appealing to the culture of Jesus' day. The book also displays evidence of independent research. For instance, there are a number of occasions where the meaning of a word in Greco-Roman authors is adduced as support for the interpretation offered.

Parables, of course, are approached from many different angles today. Happily, Hultgren rejects a reader-response hermeneutic in which the parables are interpreted subjectively. The parables are studied from the standpoint of historical criticism, and the original intention of the text is investigated. At times the author sees the redactional work of the evangelist where authenticity is to be preferred, but on the whole the author has a conservative view of the reliability of the tradition. Even where evangelicals would disagree, we can profit significantly from his study of the parable in question.

I have already mentioned the pastoral wisdom that shines through the book. Hence, the book not only stretches the mind but enlarges the heart. The emphasis on God's grace in the parables of Jesus shines through powerfully in Hultgren's expositions. The Lutheran theology of the author is evident at a number of points, but I would argue that this is mainly positive. The Lutheran emphasis on God's grace, after all, is rooted in the teaching of Jesus.

On the other hand, at some points I think the Lutheran emphasis on grace tones down the meaning of the text. For example, in the parable of the prodigal son Hultgren argues that forgiveness is granted without the need for repentance. He remarks that our repentance is never perfect in any case. I think Hultgren is incorrect in maintaining that

the prodigal did not truly repent, for "coming to himself" (Luke 15:17) and the words spoken signify repentance (see the MT of 2 Chron 6:37-38), and the necessity of repentance is a common Lukan theme (Acts 2:38: 3:19). He is even right in saying that our repentance and sorrow for sin are always imperfect. But he over psychologizes the text here, for the biblical narrative is not interested in whether our repentance is flawless but in the need to turn to God for forgiveness. He falls into the same error in the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector, saying that nothing is indicated about a change of life and Jesus did not demand repayment, which is necessary if repentance is demanded. But in this case he demands that the parable say more than is reasonable. And if the words of the tax collector are not repentance, I don't know what is. Hultgren's legitimate concern about human works is resolved if we apply his own insight. Even repentance is a gift granted by God (Acts 5:31; 2 Tim 2:25). If we applied the same principle to the parable of the Good Samaritan that Hultgren uses in interpreting the parable of the prodigal son, we would lose the edge of the parable. We could simply argue that we never truly and perfectly love our neighbor. Self-regard stains all that we do. True enough! No human being perfectly loves another. But the point of the parable is that those who know God will not draw boundaries in extending their love to others (as Hultgren himself agrees). The same issue emerges in the parable of the unforgiving slave (Matt 18:23-35). It seems to me that the necessity of forgiving to be forgiven by God is lessened in Hultgren's exegesis. He rightly says that God's forgiveness is fundamental, primary, and the only basis upon which we can forgive others. The prevenient grace of God, which the author rightly trumpets, is so powerful, however, that it leads to a changed life, even though not

a perfect one. I should not end on a negative note. This book represents scholarship at its best, and is one of the best books on the parables I have ever read.