

**Cincinnati Friends Meeting
June 8, 2008**

**MESSAGE ~ *Those Pesky Red Letters in the Parables*
by Donne Hayden**

My parents weren't religious—I never saw either of them in church, but as a child, I faithfully attended the First Baptist Church every Sunday morning. When I was eleven, my parents gave me an Easter gift—my own Bible. It was a small, white, zippered King James Version, the red-letter edition. For a long time, I paid no attention to the red letters in the back half of the book. I'm not sure how old I was before I became curious enough to read the front matter and discover why some words were written in red letters and others weren't. The explanation was, of course, that these were the words that Jesus actually spoke. His words were written in red letters! I remember going back to look at those particular words more carefully.

Years later, when I went through a period of agnostic doubt, I dismissed the Bible as a document written by those who judge and condemn others and who wish to control through fear. I could never quite dismiss the words in red letters, though I didn't accept that *all* of them were the words of Jesus. In places, however, I heard a voice come through with truths that hardly seemed connected to the rest of the words in the Bible.

According to Laurence S. Heely, Jr., publisher of the *Christian Herald*, the first red-letter edition of the New Testament was the brain-child of Louis Klopsch who was publisher of the *Christian Herald* in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He was inspired by the words in Luke 22:20: "This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." That sentence, which "provided the name for the second major division of the Bible—the New Testament—also offered Klopsch the idea for printing the words of Jesus in the color of his blood." He contacted scholars around the world and asked them "to submit passages they regarded as spoken by Christ while on earth." Eventually, publishers also included in red any words attributed to Jesus in people's dreams or visions and after he was resurrected.¹ More recently, using specific criteria to determine a scholarly consensus, the Jesus Seminar has been more discriminating in attributing words to Jesus.

Acknowledging first the language issue, i.e., Jesus did not speak English nor any modern language, we must accept that we will never retrieve Jesus' actual spoken words. "Jesus was a Galilean peasant who wrote nothing. His native tongue was Aramaic, whereas the records of what he said, created later by others, exist only in Greek, with a few texts in further translation preserved in

Latin, or Coptic, or other ancient language."²

A second problem in determining Jesus' actual words is the fact that none of the original written documents exist. The earliest scrap of writing, identified as a fragment of the Gospel of John, can be dated to about 125 C.E., a hundred years after the death of Jesus. Although around 5000 Greek manuscripts contain all or part of the New Testament writings, all were copied by hand and no two of them are exactly alike. Not until the invention of printing press in 1454 were identical copies of any document reproduced.³

Third, for centuries, most people could not read nor write, and even those who could were not wealthy enough to actually possess many "books" or the equivalent of them, scrolls. Jesus' teachings were transmitted orally for hundreds of years, especially in the first hundred after his death before his disciples began writing things down. People *listened* to the teachings, first from Jesus himself, and later from his disciples. Still later, they heard the stories from disciples of the disciples. For those who could neither read nor write, "The living testimony of disciples and disciples of disciples remained more highly esteemed than the relatively rare

¹"Origin of Red-Letter Bibles." ESV Bible Blog.
<http://www.esv.org/blog/2006/03/red.letter.origin>

² Bernard Brandon Scott, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*.

³ Robert W. Funk, et al. *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* p. 6.

and suspicious written text.” (Scott, page 4)

The consensus of the one hundred Biblical scholars from around the world who form the Jesus Seminar is that “only a very small portion of the words attributed to Jesus actually go back to him. The proportion of authentic parables is perhaps higher . . . The parables, it seems, were more difficult to imitate because less widely used in the ancient world and because Jesus achieved a consummate artistry in creating them.” (Scott, page 14)

In searching out the authentic voice of Jesus, a voice that occurs most often in the parables of the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas, scholars use the following *combination of characteristics* (all from *The Parables of Jesus: The Red-Letter Edition*):

1. The main topic of Jesus’ sayings and parables is the Kingdom of God. He talks constantly about the Kingdom of God, using metaphor and simile to compare it to every day and ordinary things that everyone knows about; for instance, the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, or like yeast, or like finding a lost coin, etc.

2. The metaphor is taken from nature or every day life—common, typical of what everyone knows and takes for granted—a harvest, a banquet, a dishonest worker, etc.

3. Jesus’ parables create tension because they reverse or confuse our

expectations. The everyday image “arrests the hearer by its vividness or strangeness.” Jesus chooses metaphors that surprise (leaven as a figure for the holy), or that exaggerate (everyone refuses an invitation to come to dinner). The reader/hearer “must always look for the surprising twist in the story, the unusual figure, the paradoxical pattern.”

4. “The parable has no conclusion. It always teases the hearer with its possible application. . . . Jesus himself never explicitly tells us how he meant them to be understood.” Jesus does not explain how a metaphor works, how the two things compared are alike. He does not provide a summing-up “moral” to the story. Instead, he tells the parable and leaves the hearer to puzzle out a meaning.

5. “The genuine parables of Jesus are narratives and . . . exhibit a characteristic plot structure.” A common plot involves the reversal of expectations. Those we expect to succeed do not; those we expect to be rewarded are not, while the one we expect to suffer does not; and often, one who does wrong is not punished. The parable of the dishonest steward is a good example.

6. Genuine parables bear the marks of “oral composition.”

a. A tight, lean, compressed style—“No more words than necessary.”

b. Uncomplicated plots and the use of pairs and sets of three, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

c. Concrete, vivid images – no abstractions. In other words, Jesus uses words like mustard seed, vineyard, and lost sheep rather than words like “resurrection,” “perceiving” or “unfailing and enduring treasure.”

With these qualities in mind, let’s read the parable of The Dishonest Steward in Luke 16: 1-9, a parable identified by the Jesus Seminar as very likely to be the authentic voice of Jesus.

He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.’ And the steward said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship. So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness.

First, notice the metaphor and its use of ordinary things. A steward—someone left in charge of a rich man’s goods—has not been taking care of business very well. When his employer, the owner of the goods, discovers his ineptness, he tells the steward to turn in his account books, that he will no longer be steward. Before he turns in the account books, however, the steward does something apparently dishonest. Fearing he will not be able to make a living either by “digging” or “begging,” the steward contacts his employer’s debtors—those who owe his master something. Apparently this is something he should have been doing all along, i.e., collecting debts for his employer. Instead of collecting all of what is owed his master, the steward collects only part, allowing the first debtor to pay back only 50 of the 100 measures of olive oil owed to the employer, and the second debtor to pay only 80 of the hundred measures of wheat he owes. Why does the steward do this? In the parable he says it is so that “people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.” By forgiving some of the debts, he hopes to curry favor, win friends and influence people.

The last line of the parable is the surprise, the twist, the reversal of our expectations. Instead of being angry with the steward, his boss “commends him for his shrewdness.” By discounting

some of what was owed, he was able to collect goods for the master. The steward, who is dishonest, is condemned neither by the narrator nor by his employer.

That’s the end of the parable. There is no real conclusion; the metaphor is not explained nor the “message” clarified. This parable “embarrassed Christendom from the beginning” says Jesus Seminar scholar Bernard Brandon Scott in this book, *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*. “The parable has puzzled both ancient and modern interpreters.” (Note, page 32). On the surface, the parable seems to advocate dishonesty among employees. This parable makes sense only if we consider it in light of the fact that Jesus “talked constantly about the Kingdom of God,” most especially about how the Kingdom of God is unlike the kingdoms of men. If we use this awareness to puzzle out the meaning, the parable’s message becomes clear.

A rich man, a Master = God, all-compassionate, all-forgiving

The Steward = someone entrusted by God to care for His “goods” –

The Goods = love of God, love of neighbor, love of self

Debtors = people who have been withholding love and compassion from God and perhaps from others

The Steward’s deception = retrieving 50% or 80% of love and compassion where none was being given

The Steward’s motive = though self-serving, it also served God’s purposes of giving and receiving love among humanity

The Master’s commending the Steward’s shrewdness = Unlike earthly masters, God is not concerned with receiving ALL that he is owed, and he is unconcerned with punishing the weak-willed or imperfect humans. Instead of the punishment we would expect, God commends the Steward. Isn’t this as good as Jesus saying, “God is not interested in punishing you for your sins. He is more interested in the love you can generate among yourselves.”

If we read every parable focusing on how the Kingdom of God is unlike the kingdoms of men, and understanding the goods and currency of God to be love and compassion, we are more likely to “hear” the authentic voice of Jesus.