Christian paradox by secular parables
Stephen Curkpatrick

Gospel parables exhibit a plasticity that is theologically adaptive to an extraordinary range of paradoxical foci and impetuses within Christian faith. The foci and impetuses that are here correlated with such plasticity are: the secular or common life contexts of gospel engagement by contrast to sacred demarcations of life; futurity of focus that is compellingly present and imperative; so, formation for situational decisions rather than acquired content for prescriptive ethics.

By their narrative and aphoristic expression of the reign of God in the midst of common life, parables and aphorisms exhibit paradoxes that are essentially eschatological in form and existential in encounter. What is conveyed about God within parabolic textures is otherwise in reference to the reign of God, yet intimately related to human life in portrayals of this reign by analogy to ironic or quirky situations within human experience. In this mode of communication, parables invoke biblical testimony, even as they interface with the “secular” life of market place and social interaction. “Secular” here is the realm of human activity without explicit reference to an extrinsic (sacred) reality in valuations of daily commerce (see Taylor on the secular). “Secular” is the context within which Christians are wholly exposed to a singular distinction between the reality of God and human life that is nevertheless given within a unique gospel correlation as God’s generosity and veracity encountered through surprising encounters, particularly in parables and aphorisms.

Naked faith, fig leaves and parables
Within the Enlightenment and emerging modern era, deferential theology sewed rational fig leaves over the raw nakedness of gospel challenges in pursuit of contemporary plausibility for Christian identity. Yet seamless rational defence of dogma was made superfluous by a shift from reason’s presumed perspicuity, to reason having perspective (Kant, late 18th C). For Kant, we cannot know the truth of assertions about God, however rationally these are argued; confined to phenomena, religion can only be concerned with morality. Variegated expression of the “golden rule” became a basic criterion of much nineteenth century Christian theology, consolidating earlier enlightenment focus on social contract. Yet even as ethically focused, theology was mocked for wistfully projecting divinity from human qualities (Feuerbach).

Emerging secular modernity asserted no need of religion, declaring that humanity is quite capable of compassion and respect for others without it. Spooked by this challenge, theological strategies have tended to focus on making ethics or more accurately, negotiated social contracts the primary currency of faith, so deploying a fig leaf for acceptable expression of religious piety before forums of contemporary approval. Yet pervasive questioning of Christian faith challenges a “small target” ethical focus, even as social commentary casts
Christianity among comparative religious traditions, admonishing religious adherents for presuming to be more moral than non-religious people. Modernity barely tolerates religion as a fiction deployed to motivate action or to moderate desire.

The theological strategy of making morality underpin piety occurs in deference to a contemporary ethos that will not tolerate Christians presuming any moral high ground. Fig leaves of social deference stitched over the naked vulnerability of Christian gospel ultimately lapses into partisan ethical foci within general expressions of theism. Theism blended with ethics can merge with any spiritual alliance in quest of social acceptance—as yet another fig leaf that hides the nakedness of Christian testimony to the gospel’s unique articulation of God’s generosity for all humanity.

Amid these emergent secular sensibilities, the gospel calls us to counter-intuitive values that are lived with vulnerability among people who have relative and changing ethical points of reference. Being naked before the presumed righteousness of social values that are proudly asserted as not religiously authorized (even if they are a pale imitation of values once derived from Christian sources), the gospel articulates for our dignity, another reality that is disclosed by a word otherwise than our own—the reign of God as both good and news. Christians in any time or place are called to live gospel values in vulnerability amid humanity in which ethically, people are in constant flux, not knowing their right hand from their left hand, even as they exhibit inklings of integrity in a desire for genuine dignity and generosity.

Gospel parables are cast within “secular” ingredients of life in their focus on arbitrary, tragic and comic experiences. Parables speak otherwise than by sacred demarcations of life within which, theological fig leaves are stitched over the naked vulnerability of faith.

Biblical testimony to the gospel enhances human freedom for decisions, relationality and responsibilities before God in grace in the midst of creation that is given as a gift. By contrast to sacred demarcations, we are wholly exposed to a singular distinction between God and human. The gospel’s imperative is to specifically Christian faith and vocation in any context of life. We are before God as loved in the midst of creation given as a seamless gift.

Whether by rite, artifact or natural phenomena, to designate some things as sacred and by implication, other things as not, is alien to life that anywhere and at any time, can be lived within the generosity of grace. Without such faith, the world is “secular”—sometimes after the vaunted and distorted expressions of secular within atheism. Yet atheism is humanity in need of grace, not prescriptive demarcations between sacred and profane.

Demarcating aspects of life as sacred by contrast to common also adds mystique to hierarchical authority and assumed institutional mediations of grace. The gospel announces grace for all people, whether they are pious or not, even as it resists religious criteria for the sake of the “irreligious”. Within the gospel,
secular implies that life is not selectively “sacred” but in seamless extravagance, is a gift from God before whom we can engage all aspects of human existence through Christological generosity and veracity.

Jesus’ parables are secular in texture, even as they speak of God’s reality intersecting human existence (so eschatology), interrupting presumed normality with surprising generosity, new valuations and veritable possibilities. In the context of gospel, parables give focus to Christian proclamation as vulnerable amid humanity and common life—without fig leaves of either rational defence or deference to social plausibility in justifying an acceptable religious identity.

Through parables, naked possibilities of human freewill are played out in either offended resistance or joyous response within naked faith. Parables also present a challenge to secular impetuses, which tend to endorse a present status quo, but are always before the futurity of a word that speaks otherwise, challenging every secular quest for its existential underpinning (after Manoussakis’ identification of “protological” quest).

Language, decisions and futurity
The gospel gives us a language by which we can speak of God’s reality or reign in relation to human existence. Gospel parables and sayings in particular offer a language about this reality as eventfully encountered within familiar experiences of life. We yearn for such language. (Apropos Fuchs, Ebeling, Gogarten, Jüngel, and Jenson)

An inevitable implication of the gospel’s eventful testimony is that without this word, we have no language for speaking about God’s reality within human encounter, which is the agnostic spectre that haunts theism. Apart from receiving such language as a gift, anything articulated about God is finally conjectured, seemingly pasted on to existence and without traction in human life. To respond to the language of gospel is also to be liberated for the reality to which this language gives access. This language invokes eventful possibilities in the midst of life.

A central feature of biblical testimony is its eventfulness: the future is always yet to be engaged in volitional freedom, decisions and responsibility—as new events and effects amid life within this response to God’s futurity. This is the eventful texture of gospel and parable, expressed by imperatives to respond to the futurity or reign of God.

Within human existence, the future is unknown; concern for the future is a perennial preoccupation expressed by calculation, conjecture and vigorous providential activity. By contrast, Scripture refers to the sure promises of God’s word. Our decisions relate to the future; trust is stepping into a future articulated by the word as promise.

Cast in the midst of time and life, parables set numerous contexts for a word that invokes decision for God’s reign or futurity. In brief but slightly skewed images of familiar human concerns, the gospel through parables presents imperatives by which the reality of God is encountered in crucial decisions.
The gospel word, as orientated to the futurity of God’s reign, is only substantiated by decisions in critical events within which, we engage new possibilities: a vocative word is heard as an imperative to decision for another reality and so future other than any we have assumed, yet even now present to our lives. By response or non-response, this reality is experienced, either as invitation to expansive joy or as a withering of gifts: *to have and to be given more, or not to have, with even what we have being taken away*. Parables give the briefest narrative shape to such decisive possibilities for our response to their imperatives.

The reality of God is not a flight to timelessness but is encountered in a pending moment with ensuing implications. The reign of God is near; encounter occurs in our response. Parables exemplify this imperative response as a crucial moment that can change our existence.

The gospel’s impetus is entirely unlike mythology. With either optimism or pessimism, mythology eradicates time through timeless images of loss in “the way things are”, tinged with wistful longing for “what might be, yet cannot be”. By contrast, gospel *apokalypsis* (revelation) accentuates time as events and crises invoking decision for a reality and so futurity by which life can be truly different.

The language of gospel is confronting, introducing crises of decision that can change everything. Gospel exhibits a pending and decisive moment when everything will be different, even if refused. The focus is on present imperative, decision and futurity. Natural recurrences are not reiterated, as in rites and rituals appealing to gods and mythic verities in projections of perennial desire and its frustration within time.

Parables invoke another reality that is nevertheless encountered within our existence, the disclosure of which is completed in gospel *apokalypsis*. This word, which is otherwise than our own, is cast within familiar images, invoking new possibilities for ourselves and for others. This is not mythology but *apokalypsis*. Without a capacity to speak as *good news*, eventfully within our lives and to the futurity of our existence, parables would have no new word to offer. They would be minimalist stories that merely reflect our existence as *nothing new under the sun*.

In biblical testimony, events of the past are incomplete without their signature anticipation of God’s futurity.

The quest for historical evidence seeks a particular veracity that is foreign to faith. Historical dilemmas arise concerning Scripture within a backward gaze that also seeks analogous correlations with other reference points within historical purview. By contrast, biblical veracity is cast forward as tangible and eventful but as yet, unverifiable in its futurity, because this reality as promise is always yet to occur; it is eventful as new in its unique occurrence.

Biblical apocalypse is tangible as anticipatory: past events of its testimony are remembered, recited and articulated in expectation. Like the event of marriage vows and everything that prefaced this occasion, Scripture’s veracity is contingent on what is lived forward in eventful fidelity of faith. In its articulation and interpretation, biblical memory is eventful with expectation. This memory eludes
archival quests to retrieve the past; this memory is tangible and present as eventful within the anticipatory life of faith. Within any glance to the past in Scripture, there is always focus on trusting the word or promises of God.

Promise is futurity; as anticipated, it cannot be ruled out as impossible; nor can its eventful past of previous anticipation be circumscribed, for its eventfulness is yet to be completed in what is to occur within promise. By the word of promise, the shape of any event in the past is known and interpreted by what it faithfully invokes in anticipation. This is the essence of Scripture’s historicity as memory of eventful and anticipatory testimony. This is always the eventful context of engagement with gospel and parable as imperatives to respond to the futurity or reign of God.

In their focus on futurity as a present encounter, as the future already becoming present, parables exhibit a minimalist ethical stance, while being everywhere framed by imperatives to righteousness. Parables present a variegated ethic of decision rather than a valorization of specific moral content.

Character by decision

Fictional characters that are without inner reflection and complex interaction with others have been described as “flat” characters (Forster Aspects of the Novel). Their characterization is depicted by actions exhibiting a “type” rather than by any exploration of motive. Flat characters are defined by a singular quality and are therefore assumed to be uninteresting.

Criteria for identifying “flat” characters may be pertinent to the modern novel, which explores personality, character flaws and motivation through an extensive narrative. Biblical testimony seems not to be interested in these—therefore the literary judgment that biblical characters are generally “flat” and therefore less interesting than the complex characters of modern novels. Parable characters are particularly “stereotypical”—for example, those finally invited to a wedding banquet as good and bad.

Biblical characters are known by their actions. We know nothing of Judas’ inner thoughts and motivation for betraying Jesus, despite numerous conjectures—from political idealism to sordid gain—that have been proposed for this infamous betrayal. Judas is a prime candidate for psychological exploration, yet he is only known by his fateful action.

The pertinent point of biblical characterization is that we cannot untangle the multiple threads of implicit assumptions and conscious intentions that are present in any human assertion or activity. Who can discern their errors? asks the Psalmist. Can we tease out our implicit and explicit motivations for any action? Paul’s insight into the dilemmas of moral rectitude—the good I would do, I do not do, but the evil I would not do, I do—reminds us that within any good intention, we can harbour ambiguous, even conflicting motives. With an absence of inner psychological exploration, biblical testimony depicts motivation as a tangled web of good intentions and potentially injurious self-deceptions. Characters are commended for faith exhibited through actions.
Whatever our temptations, challenges or contortions of mind and heart, these are finally evaluated, not by our inner complexities but by the demonstrative fruits we produce. The Sermon’s “internal ethic”—offered in several antitheses (you have heard it said … but I say to you)—suggests that our actions are latent within particular attitudes. Yet as the imperative to resist temptation suggests or capitulation to its enticement shows, the tangible expression given to any thought is finally the crucial issue.

If biblical characters are often designated as “flat” and without a window into their inner world, they are nevertheless revealing in their actions. For example, Peter’s insistent denial occurs without apparent premeditation—he was previously adamant that denial is unthinkable. This is precisely what is of interest concerning Peter and so also us. It is Peter’s explicit denial not his inner deliberation that is surprising; even Peter is surprised, for on realization of what he had done, he departed and wept bitterly. Despite our deliberations, we sometimes surprise ourselves by what we actually do in a singular, unpremeditated, spontaneous word or deed.

The brief sayings of Proverbs cast seemingly “flat” characters in two “types”—wise and foolish. Yet through these contrasting portrayals, an extraordinary range of reflections on human character and behaviour are given. Rather than exploring the inner psyche of each, wise and foolish are compared with many pertinent images by which we might evaluate explicit character—for example, like clouds and wind without rain is a person who promises gifts that are never given.

The characters of soliloquy parables—a prodigal son, a rich fool, an unjust manager, an impervious judge and others—exhibit brief internal reflections on their circumstances, yet such deliberations are focused toward explicit decisions and actions.

Righteousness is evident in decisions exhibited as actions. Without a decision, nothing happens; there is no expression of tangible righteousness among others. For this reason, there is an absence of focus on motivation in biblical testimony. If this qualifies biblical characters in general and parable characters in particular to be “flat”, it is also the possibility of faith and righteousness expressed by decisions, regardless of our inner complexity.

Psalmists exhibit tumultuous concern over unrighteousness, yet this is no alibi for focus on personal complexity but instead, an imperative to trust the word of God. Prophets survey society at critical times with an anguish that only finds resolution in the theatre of God’s reality and not by focus on traumas of the soul. Wisdom writers lament the brevity of life or human folly, counselling for wise use of our time and opportunities with reference to the enduring veracity and relevance of God’s righteousness and wisdom.

Our decisions and actions in the context of human life are finally, more relevant than the complex web of motivation that is knotted with regrets and unrealized possibilities. If we presume adequately to sift our motivations before we can act rightly, the biblical response is that we will never finish this task—it is
abyssal. This is why we need good news. In its generosity, the gospel frees us to act within the received identity of another—*it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*. In our willing reception of unique dignity in God’s generosity, our inner complexity ceases to be the issue.

If we are always the issue, our decisions will be vexed and hesitant. This does not diminish the need to engage our decisions within specific contexts with intelligent consideration. Yet without a conflicted self-intruding, there is greater freedom for singularly focused, uninhibited actions. This is what the reception of grace offers for our dignity in unambiguous generosity among others.

**Conclusion**

Gospel testimony accentuates human freedom for decisions, relationships, responsibilities and accountability before God in grace, within life that is given as a gift. We are exposed wholly to a singular imperative of distinctive response to the word of God, without sacred demarcations, in the midst of life. Christian vocation, after the foci of parables, is without “sacred” impetus: consistent with their gospel contexts, they summon decisions to new freedom for relationships and responsibilities, before God in grace, amid the common life of people within the gospel’s call to discipleship. Christian faith is always an imperative to specifically Christian call and vocation within any context of life. We are before God as loved in the midst of humanity that is seamless as a context for generosity and veracity. Parables are paradoxical, presenting a word otherwise within familiar scenes of our experience; they speak of God’s reality intersecting ordinary human existence. Gospel parables are theologically adaptable to a range of foci and impetuses within Christian faith, interfacing the gospel with secular or common life contexts of human response; their futurity of focus is compellingly present and imperative, inculcating character formation for situational decisions rather than acquired content for prescriptive ethics. In the context of gospel, parables give focus to eventful Christian call and expressions of discipleship at any time and in any place of life.

**References**


