

their function of breaking down paradigms or transforming perspectives.<sup>4</sup> William Beardslee, for instance, compares the Gospel parables to Zen koans, a type of clever verbal harassment used by Buddhist teachers to disorient their disciples. One well-known koan is "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"<sup>5</sup> Eta Linnemann sees transformation of perspective as the most significant role of parable. In a tense confrontation between speaker and audience, the "narrator, who has at his disposal nothing other than the power of language, is able to prevail upon his listeners, because through the parable he offers them a new understanding of the situation."<sup>6</sup> Somewhat similar views have been expressed by several others.<sup>7</sup>

Did Jesus use parables in this way? If so, how did they function to transform the perspectives of his hearers? In this paper we shall see that Jesus did use parables in this way, and we shall examine the function of the Synoptic parables for this purpose. Rather than survey the extensive secondary literature recently written on this subject, our approach will be to examine the parables themselves. For each relevant feature investigated, we shall give several examples from these parables and list others. In an appendix these features will be charted for sixty-four Synoptic parables. Biblical quotations will conform to the New International Version.

To date, most writers involved in this aspect of parable research have assumed a critical attitude toward the Gospels. For them, the context of each parable, its audience, and especially any interpretation given in the text, are automatically suspect. As a result they often claim that we cannot know the original circumstances of a parable, and sometimes they replace information supplied by the Gospels with speculative reconstructions of their own. Such a procedure denies the Bible's own claims to inspiration and rejects the historical evidence that the Gospels were written by apostles and their associates. In consequence much valuable information is discarded. We shall take the parables as they stand.

### **Presenting an Alternative Perspective**

Surveying the Synoptic parables, it soon becomes clear that Jesus did not content himself with the mere destruction of perspective (as in a koan) but that he regularly presented an alternative perspective to his audience. This alternative paradigm or perspective can take various forms. We may conveniently classify these forms by distinguishing between parables which are analogues and parables which are examples. Under each of these categories, we shall further subdivide the parables into those which look at things from the same direction as the audience does and those which, so to speak, move the audience to a new location. Let us look at each of these cases in turn.

#### **Analogue**

In presenting an alternative perspective, the parable is naturally most