

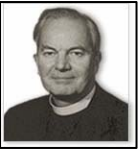


**Questions on  
A Study in New Testament Communication  
by T. F. Torrance<sup>1</sup>**

BACKGROUND

- Adolf Jülicher (of whom I could find no portrait) was a German 19<sup>th</sup>-century expositor who revolutionized the interpretation of parables in his 1888 *The Parables of Jesus* by rejecting the allegorical approach which had been standard for more than a millennium. He asserted that parables aren't complex allegories, and have only a single point. 
- C. H. Dodd (1884-1973) was an English mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian and source critic who, with Joachim Jeremias (1900-1982), emphasized the search for the historical and eschatological context when interpreting parables. Dodd also emphasized that parables should have generally just one point (an idea which persists today, though it's clearly not always true). 
- T. F. Torrance (1913-) was a Scottish Presbyterian minister, son of missionaries and one of the top reformed theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a student of Karl Barth who focused on topics including the trinity and incarnation, science and theology and Calvin and reformed theology. 
- The classic definition of a sacrament is “an outward, physical sign of an inward, spiritual grace.”

QUESTIONS

1. According to Dodd, what must one do to understand the meaning of one of Jesus' parables? (See p. 299, par. 0.) How does Torrance's view differ? (See p. 299, par. 1-300.)
2. A key passage on the topic of the revelation of the Gospel is 1 Cor 2. Read 1 Cor 2:9-16. (See also 2 Cor 4:1-6 and Mt 16:16-17, Lk 10:21-24 and Jn 3:3-8.) How biblical is Torrance's view, as in such statements as:

Undoubtedly the divine communication must involve analogy if it is to get across to men who can only think in terms of human and worldly analogies, but the whole significance of the Parable is that it is *analogy with a difference*, analogy which has at its heart an eschatological event which, until it actually overtakes us, nothing in the natural or historical order can begin to reveal (p. 299, par. 1).

How does this apply to the parables of the kingdom in Mk 4 and Mt 13—parables which each only show a single piece of the puzzle of the kingdom? Is a nonbeliever unable to comprehend the message of the parable of the pearl of great price—or unable to put the pieces together? <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 3, p. 298 (1950)

<sup>2</sup> Consider also Calvin's words in his commentary on 1 Cor 2:15, “What superior wisdom this is, which so far transcends all human understanding, that man cannot have so much as a taste of it! While, however, Paul here tacitly imputes it to the pride of the flesh, that mankind dare to condemn as foolish what they do not comprehend, he at the same time shows how great is the weakness or rather bluntness of the human understanding, when he declares it to be incapable of spiritual apprehension. For he teaches, that it is not owing simply to the obstinacy of the human will, but to the impotency, also, of the understanding, that man does not attain to the *things of the Spirit*. Had he said that

3. Below is a quotation from a long-time Christian in a non-denominational American church:

My friend is a very level-headed deep thinker, who also happens to be an environmental lawyer. Her husband became a believer about a year before she did, and kept hauling her along to church—although I do believe she came with all willingness and seemed to enjoy it very much. She admitted to not being a believer. So she attended pretty much every Sunday and every other Thursday for about a year or more, and probably heard the complete gospel somewhere between 70 and 90 times in that period...

After Sue finally became a Christian, it became clear in discussion that *as far as she was concerned, she had never heard the gospel at all until the day when she finally accepted it*. We all know better, of course, so it was amazing that even though she her ears had heard it all that time, her brain/heart/whatever didn't actually “hear” it until that day. This proves the need for persistence, and not making assumptions about what other people know. When her heart was ready, the gospel was clear as crystal, but before that it was mud.

How does this compare with Torrance’s view of revelation of the Gospel? How does it square with your experience of sharing the Gospel? What form does the lack of “understanding” on the part of unbelievers which is mentioned in 1 Cor 2:14 take here and elsewhere?

4. What does Torrance mean when he calls parables *sacramental* (p. 301)?
5. According to Torrance, what is special about parables as a pedagogical tool? Torrance writes,

...Jesus did not want to judge the hearers on the spot in any final fashion. The *eschaton* had broken into the present but if men were confronted openly with the *eschaton* in the Word and presence of Jesus in their unbelief, they would be finally damned on the spot. But Jesus veiled the *eschaton* so that it encountered men obliquely. (p. 304, par. 1)

Is this biblical or merely poetic? How else might Jesus have communicated the Gospel which would have run the risk of “crushing them to the ground by an open display of majesty and might”?

6. In the first full paragraph of page 302, Torrance talks about revelation in John, saying that in the fourth Gospel those who abide in the Word are the ones to whom it is revealed, and who enter the kingdom. How is John’s concept of *abiding* reconciled with Torrance’s idea of parables acting on two levels (p. 301), and with Paul’s discussion of revelation (1 Cor 2)? Is this *abiding* how the Holy Spirit chooses to work?

*Fun fact:* Before the Reformation, not just the parables but all scripture was interpreted following the example of Origen, who looked primarily for allegorical interpretations rather than literal/historical. “Both Luther and Calvin renounced the allegorical method of interpretation, calling the allegorizers ‘clerical jugglers performing monkey tricks (*Affenspiel*)!’”<sup>3</sup>

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men are not *willing* to be wise, *that* indeed would have been true, but he states farther that they are not *able*. Hence we infer, that faith is not in one’s own power, but is divinely conferred.” (Cf. [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).)

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Word & World*, 5, 248-257 (1958)—a publication of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn.