

Was Jesus' Original Message Distorted ...Even by the Gospel Writers? The Parable of the Wedding Feast

Matthew 22:1-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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October 16, 2011

For more than 150 years now, biblical scholars have recognized the highly influential role that the gospel writers themselves played when crafting their version of the life and ministry of Jesus. **It is not a recent phenomenon, therefore, to declare that not all the words in red in our red-letter Bibles are the actual words spoken by Jesus.**

Scholars have come to recognize that each biblical author has framed his narrative to fit his own theological purposes – which was the Christian message that he was trying to get across to his readers that originally constituted his church community in a particular time and place. Yet, as progressive Christian scholars will also declare, **that does not mean that the stories don't point to and reveal truth, but that they are simply more often the construct of the biblical author than they are specific literal historical events and actual conversations that they are portrayed to be.**

While many who sit in church pews across this country may consider such an approach and outlook on the scriptures as **heretical**, it is indeed the perspective held by basically all mainline biblical scholars today. Not only that, it is something that has been taught for decades, to some degree, in all of our Presbyterian seminaries. **It is those of us who stand in church pulpits each week, therefore, who have been remiss in not passing on this understanding of biblical interpretation to the church in general.** We are the ones who are guilty of not educating the congregations we serve, most likely out of fear of the backlash it might cause. And I am among those who believe that this willful neglect is partially responsible for the decline in organized religion in the Western world today.

Yet in many congregations, like ours, the word is getting out. This, however, has most likely helped fuel the flames of our current fundamentalist backlash – of those who have convinced themselves that the progressives have caved in to the secular trends of a pluralistic society. Needless to say, I beg to differ.

Today's parable from Matthew 22, known as a **parable of the Wedding Feast**, is an excellent case-in-point in demonstrating how the biblical author has taken the core of a parable once told by Jesus and reframed it, by means of allegory, to suit the point that he is trying to make. Matthew's bottom line, in this case, is that God has turned God's back on the Jewish religious authorities for refusing God's invitation to follow Jesus. In the second part of the parable, most likely not part of the original, Matthew sends the warning that even those new guests who are invited into the kingdom of God – Christians – will be cast out in the Final Judgment if they are not properly 'attired'; that is, live the proper Christian life.

I offer now, for your consideration, the commentary on this parable by the progressive biblical scholars who are part of a group called the **Jesus Seminar**.

[Matthew's version of this parable] has strayed from the original parable. The body of the parable has been turned into an allegory of the history of salvation: a king (God) prepares a feast for his son (Jesus) and invites his subjects (Israel) to the banquet. They treat the invitations lightly, or kill the king's servants (the prophets). The king destroys them and their city (Jerusalem), and invites others (foreigners, including non-Jews) to the feast.

This allegory is alien to Jesus, since the story has been thoroughly Christianized and looks back on the destruction of Jerusalem [in the year 70 CE, nearly 40 years after Jesus' death, but before Matthew wrote his gospel].

To the basic parable Matthew has added a warning addressed to those who enter the banquet hall but are not properly dressed. This is a reference to Christians who join the community but turn out not to be fit and so are expelled. This addition was probably of Matthew's own devising, since it agrees with one of his favorite themes: the Christian community as a mixture of the good and the bad, the deserving and the undeserving, who will be sorted out in the judgment.

The final saying attached to the parable in 22:14, ["For many are called, but few are chosen"] is also Matthew's invention: it expresses his point of view precisely."

The quandary for me, as a pastor and preacher, is wondering how much weight to put behind what so many believe are the words and the perspective of the gospel writer, not Jesus himself. By building his own interpretational spin into the biblical account, has the gospel writer distorted any of the actual teachings of Jesus and the purpose of Jesus' message and ministry? If so, how does that affect the way we consider the scriptures to be the "authoritative Word of God"? Does this suggest that reading the biblical narrative literally, then, is errant in and of itself?

I find these questions to be among the most insightful, crucial, and potentially dangerous, facing the Christian church today. They provide what many would consider a profound threat to Christianity, or at least to *traditional* Christianity and its doctrines. **It is this issue that is perhaps at the very core of the divisions that denominations, including our own, are facing today.** Issues such as who should or should not be ordained, for instance, become simply the surface manifestations of the deeper issue of how to see and approach the Bible, biblical interpretation, and the authority we ascribe to the Bible.

Through the scholarly work of such luminaries as Paul Tillich, John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, Walter Wink, Carter Hayward, Peter Gomes, John Dominic Crossan, and others, many progressives believe that these questions must be addressed in order for Christianity to be truly relevant in our post-modern, post-denomination, post-Christian society.

To use the overworked analogy of peeling away the outer layers of an onion to get to its core, **there is a need to peel back the layers that Christianity has added to the original message that Jesus brought about the kingdom of God.** That's what the Reformation attempted to do back in the 16th century to the layers of Christianity that had been added on by the Roman Catholic Church. Today's reformers are now convinced that **we also need to peel back the layers that are built into what we read in scripture itself.**

Here in the 21st century, not only has the time has come for a new reformation, but many believe we have already entered into the beginning of one! In that regard, I would like to introduce you to the writings that many progressive biblical scholars believe are the closest to the actual words and teachings of Jesus. This body of work, lost for over 1000 years, was discovered in 1945 in an ancient earthenware jar lodged in a cliff in Egypt – much like the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in a cave in Israel. Among the writing found is a collection known now by the name, ***The Gospel of Thomas.***

This gospel, it is believed, was written around the year 50 CE, making it older than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – therefore closer to the source of the oral tradition that was passed on from Jesus' day. Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings or stories of Jesus, each introduced by the simple formula, "Jesus said," or alternatively, "he said." For all practical purposes, Thomas is a gospel without a narrative framework; it is a sayings gospel. Scholars have long speculated that Matthew and Luke made use of a similar collection of sayings in creating their gospels, what scholars simply call Q.

Saying number 64 of Thomas corresponds to today's parable of the Wedding Feast. Since is free of all of Matthew's allegorizing and Christianizing of the text, Thomas' version is believed to be much closer to the original story (and message) that Jesus would have told. Let me share this version of the parable with you.

A person was receiving guests. When he had prepared the dinner, he sent his slave to invite the guests. The slave went to the first and said to that one, "My master invites you." That one said, "some merchants owe me money; they are coming to me tonight. I have to go and give them instructions. Please excuse me from dinner."

The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master has invited you." That one said to the slave, "I have bought a house, and I have been called away for a day. I shall have no time."

The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master invites you." That one said to the slave, "My friend is to be married, and I am to arrange the banquet. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me from dinner."

The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master invites you." The one said to the slave, "I have bought an estate, and I am going to collect the rent. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me."

The slave returned and said to his master, "Those whom you invited to dinner have asked to be excused." The master said to his slave, "Go out on the streets and bring back whomever you find to have dinner."

That's it. This version of the parable found in Thomas is relatively simple. **Note that it ends with an inclusive invitation, not destruction and judgment.** In this version of the parable, this, says Jesus, is what the kingdom of heaven is like: **the expected guests are absent, and the most unlikely ones are present.** All of these features are suggestive, in the eyes of the Jesus Seminar, of the authentic Jesus.

And yet...and yet, the Gospel of Matthew is part of the biblical canon, and the Gospel of Thomas is not. **Here's the dilemma. Is the point that Jesus wants to make is that the kingdom of God is inclusive in that it embraces the unexpected, or is it one of judgment and condemnation to those who do not conform to the Christian code of belief and conduct, which as stated, many believe was Matthew's point, not Jesus'. Or, like any paradox, is it a mixture both?**

Well, just as an open-ended parable is meant to leave us in suspense, to think through the ending for ourselves and where we fit within the parable, I'll leave this sermon open-ended for the same purpose...for your consideration.

Amen.