

Thomas G. Long, *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2024. 439 pages. \$50.

What does one do in retirement? Well, what Thomas G. Long has done is to write the longest book of his career, longer even than his influential introductory textbook, *The Witness of Preaching* (360 pages).¹ Clearly, the subject and approach of the book are important to him.

As I opened *Proclaiming the Parables*, I assumed it would be an expansion and application of his short chapter on parables in his classic, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*.² While there are elements of that now thirty-five-year-old essay that carry over into Long's new work, there is also a tone of "How my mind has changed" to the book. It modifies his earlier approach through the lens of the turn toward explicit theological concerns represented in some of Long's more recent work.³ A book on the parables in the Synoptic Gospels gives Long the opportunity to model critical exegetical (especially narrative) methodology in service to a homiletic that has something of theological importance to say. One is reminded of Barth's commentary on Romans.

In the opening chapter, Long offers a brief review of parables scholarship to set the table for his own approach. The main thesis of the book comes to the fore when, against a purely literary approach to the parables, Long says, "the real power of parables is not in the naked parables as performance art or in the recesses of metaphorical process alone, but somewhere else. The main power of parables is in their capacity to point to what God is doing in the world, that is, to the kingdom of God. The power is not in the trope, but in the referent" (11). In the second chapter, Long discusses decisions preachers must make when interpreting parables: how to define a parable, whether to preach the parable in its final form as embedded in one of the Gospels or in some reconstructed form that attempts to get closer to Jesus' original words, when explanation of a parable is helpful and when too much explaining gets in the way of proclamation, and whether the parables offer a realized or future eschatology. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

The remainder of the book is focused on the parables themselves as found in each of the Synoptic Gospels, recognizing that each Gospel writer views parables as functioning differently. Following an overview of each Gospel that contextualizes the individual parables, Long discusses five parables in Mark, sixteen in Matthew, and eighteen in Luke.

In every chapter, I found much with which I disagreed. But such disagreement was not due to some failing of research or reasoning on Long's part, and I do not mean it as a critique of the work. It was primarily theological disagreement. Long offers a theological worldview through his commentary on the parables that is different from my theology. And this made the book as worthwhile for me to read as it would have been if Long and I were theological twins. At times, Long made me stand firmer over against him in some pre-understanding of Mark or in choosing a different analogue between a Matthean parable and our contemporary context; at other times, Long coaxed me into a new understanding of a Lukan parable. I suspect this is

¹ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016).

² "Preaching on the Parables of Jesus," in *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 87–106.

³ E.g., "No News is Bad News," in *What's the Matter with Preaching Today?*, ed. Mike Graves (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 145–157; *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); and *What Shall We Say?: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

exactly the kind of theological conversation Long hopes his readers will have as they engage this tome.

Most preachers will likely use this book as a reference book, a commentary to consult when preaching on an individual parable. And, indeed, I will never preach or teach on a Synoptic parable again without pulling *Proclaiming the Parables* off the shelf. Long's theology, however, is embroidered throughout the book with a parabolic stitch here, an expository stitch there, and illustrative stitches throughout. To consult instead of reading this book would be to miss the full theological tapestry Long offers us.

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