

Speaking Parables, by David Buttrick

reviewed by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [October 25, 2000](#) issue

Most books on the parables of Jesus seem to slice away at the biblical text. They parse sentences until a parable's plot crumbles into fragments, or they so domesticate the narratives that they become little more than helpful hints for daily living. If a writer isn't careful, even the best biblical exegesis can render a parable lifeless. But David Buttrick's new book clearly belongs to a different breed. Readers may wonder if the "speaking" in Buttrick's title is a verb or an adjective. Take your pick. As the former, it indicates the book's guidance on how to unleash these picture stories from the pulpit. As the latter, it points to Buttrick's ability to show the parables' potent speaking life--an immediacy just itching to awaken the imagination.

A master of homiletic design, writing during his final year of teaching at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Buttrick is more interested in what the parables do to us and our consciousness than in what they mean. For Buttrick, these narratives are "play scripts for a drama"--delightful surprises intended to intrude upon and alter our lives. He envisions the preacher's task as "designing a collision in the minds of a congregation" between the grace-filled world God offers and the merit-charged culture we engineer. "When a parable hands you an exciting disruption," he writes, "for heaven's sake don't toss it aside. . . . If we are going to preach parables, let's preach with excitement, the excitement of craft and challenge."

The opening chapters, in which Buttrick lays the scholarly groundwork for parable preaching, make clear his affection for ministry and the craft of preaching. There is a wonderful, though brief, treatment of the "gift" of the Bible. There is a helpful summary of clues to the mystery of God's character in the parables. Throughout, Buttrick demonstrates his perceptiveness about the modern social order and about some of the triumphalistic fantasies that can creep into contemporary church life.

The bulk of the book consists of Buttrick's theological treatment of 33 parables. Some of these interpretations are innovative and refreshing, such as his excellent study and sermon on the "wheat and weeds," or his analysis of the "leaven." Others don't measure up so well. His interpretations of the "unjust judge" and the "good Samaritan" are surprisingly uncreative and lackluster.

Buttrick is heavily influenced by Jesus Seminar scholarship. He warns his readers that, at times, the gospel writers misunderstood the parables and committed "theological errors." He boldly encourages preachers to edit certain interpretations of the evangelists. But one wonders if it really matters to people in the pew whether Matthew or Luke got everything right, at least right in the way particular scholars define what is correct.

For preachers eager to hone their skills in designing a sermon, *Speaking Parables* provides 14 homilies, each followed by several pages of retrospective analysis. This is an extremely valuable gift to readers, enabling them to listen to a noted preacher and teacher reflect critically on his own words. Buttrick is not easy on himself. Yet he lays out strategies that work for good homiletic design. Most of the sermons are more dated than one might wish, some as old as 35 or 40 years. But his discussion of each one demonstrates the maturity of thinking that can emerge only over a lifetime invested in preaching.

If your shelf of books on the parables is too crowded to include space for yet another title, it's time to part with an old one and make room for this thoughtful new guide.