

KINGDOM, GRACE, JUDGMENT – Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus. By Robert Farrar Capon. Grand Rapids, Wm. Eerdmans Pub., 2002.

All preachers must come to terms with the parables of Jesus. These images form a large part of Jesus' preaching and teaching and are considered one of the most characteristic elements of that preaching and teaching. Whether one be a pulpit preacher or simply a devout bible reader, the characters in the parables dance across the imagination bearing the truth about the Kingdom of God. Needless to say, analyses and commentaries abound and a preacher looking for help or a fresh look at an old and ever new wisdom can find that abundance bewildering. I just happened across this volume and Jude Siciliano was willing to let me review it! Actually, it is a compilation of three books written by Robert Farrar Capon, an Episcopalian priest, who has a number of other books to his credit. The three that comprise this one volume were published in 1985, 1988 and 1989 under the titles of THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM, THE PARABLES OF GRACE, and THE PARABLES OF JUDGMENT respectively. My reading of this three-in-one compilation has left me with mixed feelings about his approach, but I admit to being often entertained by Fr. Capon's wit, even when I found his interpretations a bit contrived.

I think there are two ways one may approach this book. One may simply use it as a reference and come to it for insight about a particular parable or group of parables. Or one may adopt Capon's frame of reference and method and try to enter his world of interpretation. He does have his own particular approach, which the title of the volume reveals. He groups the parables into three categories of interpretation that roughly correspond to the point in Jesus' ministry that they appear according to the synoptic gospels. Thus, the "parables of the Kingdom" appear early on and the "parables of Judgment" come at the end. Capon also has a frame of reference for his interpretation which he refers to as "right-handed power" and "left-handed power." The first of these appears to be the direct and practical way in which God operates and the second is a paradoxical and intuitive mode of operation. It is clear that Capon believes God operates more in a left-handed way and that this is the way the parables should be interpreted. He also has a thoroughly evangelical theological frame of reference that overlays the approach. He believes the whole point is that humans are saved by Jesus' death and resurrection and there is nothing we humans can do to save ourselves. We are already saved and if we don't accept that salvation, that's what hell is. This, of course, is good theology but I get the impression from the books that the parables have nothing to say to us about everyday living and moral decision making. Capon himself issues a warning

(which doesn't appear till p. 363): *By the very nature of their craft, theologians are dedicated to making things philosophically tidy. If you want (as who doesn't?) a neat synthesis in which all the diverse pieces of revelation are gracefully tied together with a single ribbon of coherent principle, then they are the people to send for. But you must watch them like a hawk, because they can twist almost any two facts, however incompatible, into a thread – and with that thread, they can weave wonderfully. Fair warning then. Even if I am good, I am no better than the rest of my fellow workers on the theological loom. Always feel the goods: it's you, after all, who have to wear the suit.*" Those lines sum up my own cautions about this volume!

Capon's style is witty and, at times, glib. He is not shy about displaying his love for the Greek text since Greek words appear where one would wonder why THIS particular word needs to be displayed in Greek? There is a large question in my mind about the hermeneutical context. I see no reference to the Middle Eastern character of the parables. Capon seems to consider it all a Western document that allows for his witty Western/ Greek-inspired interpretation. If the preacher is simply using Capon as a reference for a particular parable, I would urge additional reference to the work of John Pilch's, *THE CULTURAL WORLD OF JESUS* (Liturgical Press).

It is helpful to have an overall vision of scripture but one must be careful about imposing one's own designs in that vision. Capon comes close to doing that but he makes a good case for his approach and does it in a witty and direct (even if a bit pedantic) way. This three-book compilation can serve to remind all preachers about getting too "comfortable" with our understanding of Jesus parables! There's much more than we realize in them. Reading someone else's interpretation is a good way to discover that.

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