TO SEE AND HEAR:

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY, JESUS' PARABLES,

AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

PRESENTED TO

THE 2010 GREATER SPRINGFIELD AREA PROFESSORS OF BIBLE ANNUAL

CONFERENCE AT EVANGEL UNIVERSITY, SPRINGFIELD, MISSOURI

BY

NATHAN B. DUNN

OCTOBER 7, 2010

TO SEE AND HEAR:
SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY, JESUS' PARABLES,
AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Of all the titles and epithets bestowed upon Jesus throughout the Gospels, one of the most frequently used is the title of "Teacher."[1] It is used of Jesus forty-five times, both by others (Mark 10:17-20) and as a self-designation (Matt 26:18). Additionally, the Aramaic term "Rabbi" is used to describe Jesus fourteen times throughout the Gospels, despite his lack of formal rabbinical training.

Whether in the synagogues or the open fields of Palestine, Jesus spoke and acted in such a way that earned him a reputation as a remarkable teacher. Crowds would flock to him, so intrigued by his message--and his miracles--that in their fervor they forced him to retreat into the sea and teach from a boat (Mark 4:1), and sometimes even neglected to address their basic needs for food and shelter (Mark 6:32-36). There was something fascinating about Jesus' teaching, something compelling about his persona and his mission, that gathered a community of disciples to follow him and galvanized a community of adversaries to oppose him.

Many of Jesus' teaching methods were familiar to his audience, similar in form and function to the methods of other well-known teachers of his era.[2] Much like the Stoics and Cynics of the Greco-Roman philosophical world, Jesus prescribed and enacted a lifestyle based

[1]Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 1.

[2]Pheme Perkins, *Jesus as Teacher* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990), 2-3.

on virtue and delayed gratification rather than the pursuit of wealth, status, or carnal pleasures.[3] He often spoke in proverbs and conversed with his interlocutors in short, pithy statements, like the sages and wisdom writers of Jewish history.[4] He freely interpreted and applied the Jewish Scriptures to the modern-day lives of his audience, a practice usually reserved for trained religious scholars, and taught with such insight and confidence that those who heard him "were amazed, for he taught them as one having authority" (Mark 1:21).[5] He even claimed, like the prophets, to possess the Spirit of God, and spoke with boldness about the future and the mind of God.[6]

Not all of Jesus' pedagogical strategies, though, were as common or familiar as these. One strategy in particular--the extensive use of parables--set him apart from other teachers, and he embraced it with such enthusiasm and effectiveness that it came to be recognized as the central pillar of his teaching style.

Even in (and perhaps especially in) the modern era, there are valuable lessons to be learned from the example of such a well-respected (if controversial) teacher. It is the aim of this paper to consider Jesus' adoption of parables as his core pedagogical method, using as an analytical lens the contemporary motivational approach known as Self-Determination Theory. There is much we can learn about successful teaching by considering Jesus' unique educational strategy in light of Self-Determination Theory.

We will begin by examining parables as an instructional method, followed by an exploration of the core components of Self-Determination Theory and their role in Jesus'

[3]Perkins, *Jesus as Teacher*, 3-7.

[4]Perkins, *Jesus as Teacher*, 7-10.

[5]Perkins, *Jesus as Teacher*, 10-15.

[6]Perkins, *Jesus as Teacher*, 15-22.

teaching. To conclude, I will suggest some lessons that can be learned from his example and some possible implications for our own pedagogical strategies.

The Parables Tradition

Jesus did not invent parables as a pedagogical form. There are numerous examples from across the ancient world of teachers using stories of everyday life to impart their lessons. Several can be found in the Hebrew Bible, one remarkable example being the parable of the poor man's ewe (2Sam 12:1-4), told to King David by the prophet Nathan after the king's affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. What sets Jesus' parables apart from others is not their form, it is the vast extent to which he utilized them, employing these stories as the *primary element* of his educational strategy.

Before the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, we have no historical record of any other teacher using parables as extensively as did Jesus. Parables were used rarely, most often in circumstances that demanded a unique approach, like Nathan's condemnation of David . Jesus' adoption of parables as his main form of teaching was so remarkable, in fact, that it prompted his disciples to question him about their use (Matt 13:10; Mark 4:10). Interestingly, each of the evangelists records Jesus' response in slightly different language and thus gives a slightly different emphasis to his agenda. Matthew bases Jesus' use of parables on a lengthy quote from the prophet Isaiah, emphasizing their shared prophetic experience of an unheeding audience (Matt 13:11-16). Mark and Luke also make reference to Isaiah's condemnation of those who refused to listen to God's word, but restated by Jesus in his own way rather than quoted directly (Mark 4:11-12; Luke 8:10).

All three authors record the special standing of the disciples; Jesus notes that they have been given the unique revelation of the secret (or secrets) of the kingdom of God. There is another section of his audience, however, who have not been given such privileged insights. They "see" and "hear" Jesus' message, but do not comprehend it. It is for this group that Jesus speaks in parables--although Jesus' exact rationale for using them is an issue of contention between the evangelists.

For Matthew, Jesus uses parables "because" (Greek *hoti*) the general public is unable to understand his message in any other way. Were they to be told directly the truths that Jesus wished to impart, as the disciples sometimes were, they would be unable (or perhaps unwilling) to comprehend or make use of them.[7] For Mark and Luke, however, Jesus uses parables "in order that" (Greek *hina*) the public not understand his message. Mark's statement of purpose is made stronger even still by the use of the Greek word *mēpote* ("may not" or "lest"), a construct often used with *hina* to denote intention.[8] In other words, Mark and Luke report that Jesus *intentionally* veiled his message in narrative, that he used the ambiguity of the parables to hide spiritual truths from those on whom special insight had not been bestowed.

While there are significant ramifications for this difference in the evangelists' understanding of Jesus' rationale, both explanations share a concept of parables as a "middle ground" form of communication. All three Gospels present parables as a mode of teaching that increases the understanding of some hearers while simultaneously preventing or complicating the understanding of others.[9]

---

[7]Stein, *Method and Message*, 40-41.

[8]Stein, *Method and Message*, 39.

[9]The consequences of each of these rationales ("because" versus "in order that") are more numerous and more nuanced than I am able to address here, but they are explained at great length in many commentaries,

The difficulty of interpreting Jesus' parables is apparent not only in the biblical text, as evidenced by even the disciples' failure to understand the stories' meaning (e.g., Mark 4:13; Luke 8:9), but also in the widely varied interpretations offered by scholars and theologians throughout history. In the centuries following the authorship of the Gospels, patristic commentators like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine interpreted the parables allegorically--they assigned a spiritual meaning to each detail found within Jesus' stories. They often disagreed on exactly what those details were intended to represent, but this one-for-one symbolic approach nonetheless became the *de facto* standard method of interpretation for the vast majority of the history of the Church.[10]

It wasn't until 1888 that an alternative mode of interpretation began to supplant allegory, thanks to the critical work of Adolf Jülicher. Jülicher demonstrated that parables are not allegorical in nature, but are instead "extended similes" which have only one point of comparison rather than many.[11] The true meaning of Jesus' parables, according to Jülicher, is not found in deciphering the code of metaphorical details that constitute each story as the Church Fathers had attempted, but rather in discovering and applying the single ethical point that is the central moral of the tale.[12]

---

dictionaries, and monographs. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, the application of the components of Self-Determination Theory to this issue is not dependent on adopting either rationale to the exclusion of the other, but can instead be based on their shared understanding of parables as a pedagogical strategy that enables some and hinders others.

[10]Stein, *Method and Message*, 44-50.

[11]Klyne R. Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 5-8.

[12]Charles W. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), ix.

Jülicher's work was followed and expanded by C. H. Dodd and then by Joachim Jeremias, both of whom continued to emphasize the one-point interpretation of Jesus' parables. For Dodd and Jeremias, however, that point was not merely a general moral statement, but instead was theological and eschatological in nature.[13] Moreover, beginning especially with Dodd, scholars began to recognize and embrace the polyvalence (that is, the multiplicity of possible understandings) of Jesus' parables.[14] Consider Dodd's famous definition of a parable, still often cited in modern parables scholarship:

> At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.[15]

Parables, on this definition, are thus necessarily embedded in the historical context of their telling, using common experiences in uncommon ways to spur an audience into thinking critically about its meaning and application.

It is this recognition of "leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application" that opened the door for what have become known generally as literary interpretations of the parables. These types of interpretations use modern theories of existentialism, aesthetics, literary criticism, psychology, political theory, and so forth as analytical lenses through which the parables may be viewed and understood.[16] Because of their preference for contemporary

---

[13]William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 10.

[14]John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 5-8.

[15]C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 5.

[16]For examples of each of these, see the writings of Ernst Fuchs (existentialism), Dan Via (aesthetics), J. D. Crossan (literary criticism), Mary Ann Tolbert (psychology), and William Herzog (political theory). There are, of course, many other outstanding cases of using non-historical-critical methods to interpret the parables; these are only a small representative offering.

applications over historical-critical inquiries (including the interpretive methods of Dodd and Jeremias, both of whom emphasize the necessity of understanding the ancient context in which the parables were first told) these literary interpreters have sometimes been accused of anachronism and banality.[17] Nonetheless, their work has produced many valuable criticisms of past interpretations, one significant consequence of which is the recognition of allegory as a valid approach to parables, as well as a number of profitable applications for present-day understandings of Jesus' parables.

It is on the combined foundation of Dodd's "teasing into active thought" and the productive applications of modern theories that we turn to Self-Determination Theory, a contemporary model of motivation with much explanatory and pedagogical potential for understanding Jesus' use of polyvalent stories as his primary educational strategy.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory is a theory of motivation set forth by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in their now-classic *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*.[18] Strongly supported by prior research and upheld by numerous recent studies, Self-Determination Theory has become the primary model of motivation used in discussions of human (often broadened to the more general term "organismic") behavior. It has taken a particularly prominent place in the field of education as a tool for gauging and promoting the intrinsic motivation of students.

[17]Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing," 22-23.

[18]Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (New York: Plenum, 1985).

Motivation theories, Deci and Ryan state, must contain two guiding elements. The first is "energy," an explanation of what need (whether physiological or psychological) fuels and empowers an organism to act. The second is "direction," an explanation of which specific actions an organism takes or does not take based on its reaction to internal and external stimuli. Self-Determination Theory is what Deci and Ryan call an "organismic" theory, accepting volition as an active force and thus recognizing the ability of individuals to act upon, not merely react to, their environment:[19]

> The general motivational theory presented in this book begins with the organismic assumptions of activity and structure, recognizing that human beings attempt actively to master the forces in the environment and the forces of drives and emotions in themselves. In mastering these forces, human beings integrate them into the internal, unified structure called self. The theory also, however, begins with the recognition of the previously mentioned vulnerabilities [to passivity and fractionated self-structures]. It is this dialectic, the organism's acting on the internal and external forces and being vulnerable to those forces, that is the focus of the research and theory herein discussed.[20]

Deci and Ryan note three psychological needs of humans that provide the energy for their actions. Strongly influenced by the 1959 seminal article of R. W. White, "Motivation Reconsidered: The Concept of Competence,"[21] they depart from previous understandings of motivation as response to purely physiological drives like hunger and sex and add to these a recognition of three psychological needs critical to the human experience. These three needs form the three primary components of Self-Determination Theory: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Competence, the first psychological need upon which Self-Determination Theory is built, refers to the innate desire of humans to have an effect on their environment. Any element of

---

[19]Deci and Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation*, 3-4.

[20]Deci and Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation*, 8-9.

[21]R. W. White, "Motivation Reconsidered: The Concept of Competence," in *Psychological Review* 66 (1959): 297-333.

their experience which enables "effectance," as it was termed by White, promotes a feeling of competence and therefore positively affects an individual's motivation:

> Competence is the accumulated result of one's interactions with the environment, of one's exploration, learning, and adaptation. In the broad, biological sense, competence refers to the capacity for effective interactions with the environment that ensure the organism's maintenance.... The development of competencies--walking, talking, manipulating abstract symbols, or formulating a story--are in part maturational, according to White, yet they are in large measure learned, and the learning is motivated. The need for competence provides the energy for this learning.[22]

The second core component of Self-Determination Theory, and the one from which the theory's name is derived, is autonomy, or "free[dom] from pressures, such as rewards or contingencies.... [Autonomy] is unlikely to function under conditions where controls or reinforcements are the experienced cause of action."[23] Expressed another way, "Man's primary motivational propensity is to be effective in producing changes in his environment. Man strives to be a causal agent, to be the primary locus of causation for, or the origin of, his behavior; he strives for personal causation."[24]

Relatedness, the third component of Self-Determination Theory, was initially conceptualized only as a need for meaningful interpersonal relationships, but has since been expanded to include an organism's connection to any environmentall element which it considers important--people, ideas, beliefs, locations, activities, and so forth. Insofar as an organism perceives an element of its environment to be significant, it will be energized to initiate behaviors in support or pursuit of that element. In uncharacteristically poetic language, Deci and

[22]Deci and Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation*, 27.

[23]Deci and Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation*, 29.

[24]R. deCharms, *Personal Causation: The Internal Affective Determinants of Behavior* (New York: Academic, 1968), 269.

Ryan describe relatedness as "the desire to feel connected to others--to love and care, and to be loved and cared for."[25]

Where competence, autonomy, and relatedness provide the energy for an organism's intrinsic motivation, direction is determined by what Deci and Ryan call "optimal challenges."[26] Studies have repeatedly found that organisms, whenever they are free from external inputs and suggestions, tend to choose activities of a level of difficulty that allows them to expand their competencies and increase their ability to affect their environment:

> The intrinsic needs for competence and self-determination motivate an ongoing process of seeking and attempting to conquer optimal challenges. When people are free from the intrusion of drives and emotions, they seek situations that interest them and require the use of their creativity and resourcefulness. They seek challenges that are suited to their competencies, that are neither too easy nor too difficult. When they find optimal challenges, people work to conquer them, and they do so persistently.[27]

Jesus as Teacher

Each of these elements--competence, autonomy, and relatedness, as guided by optimal challenge--can be readily found in Jesus' use of parables as his primary pedagogical method. Now that a foundational understanding of both the parables themselves and Self-Determination Theory has been established, we will lay them alongside one another in order to examine Jesus in

[25]Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, "The 'What' and 'Why' of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior," in *Psychological Inquiry* 11, 4 (2000): 231. Again, note that "others" to which an organism desires to feel connected can refer to any environmental force or object that it deems important; it is not necessarily a personal connection that forms the basis of this psychological need.

[26]Deci and Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation*, 29.

[27]Deci and Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation*, 32-33.

his role as teacher. For the sake of clarity and illustration, we will use as an example the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:3-9; Mark 4:3-9; Luke 8:5-8).[28]

Optimal Challenge

As we have previously noted, the Gospel authors do not all agree on Jesus' exact reason for adopting parables as such a significant part of his teaching method. For Matthew, it is "because" his audience could not understand Jesus' message in any other way; for Mark and Luke, it is "in order that" his audience would not understand. In either case, however, the evangelists do agree that Jesus' parables include elements of both comprehension ("seeing" and "hearing") and ignorance ("they do not see" and "they do not hear") in the response of his audience.

The seeing-and-hearing language used by Jesus to describe these dual components is drawn from the book of Isaiah (6:9-10), but also reflects passages from both Daniel (12:8-10) and Ezekiel (12:1-2). All three passages emphasize the need for Israel's careful consideration of God's message as it was expressed in the prophets' teaching, and all three are lamenting Israel's present and future failure in this regard. Set in this well-known context of Jewish history, it seems clear that Jesus intends his parables to communicate truths about God, but that these truths are not always understood by those who hear them. Comprehension of the parables' hidden truths, therefore, is a marker of the faithful and attentive seekers of God:

> The purpose of such apocalyptic rhetoric was not simply to be mysterious or enigmatic but to communicate in a way that would elicit whether one was responding in faith or not. "The parables were designed so that no response meant no perception, no understanding,

[28]Please note that a text-critical or comparative reading of the similarities and variations in the Synoptic Gospels is not my aim, and so is excluded from the following discussion. The goal instead is to consider the general depiction of Jesus as a teacher in the Gospels, and to examine his use of parables through the lens of Self-Determination Theory.

> no forgiveness." The parables give insight to the open-minded but come as a judgment on the obdurate.[29]

This listener-dependent method of communication in which comprehension is based on one's willingness and ability to access hidden information is an outstanding example of Deci and Ryan's "optimal challenge." Jesus, by using parables, presents his audience with an opportunity. Those who are willing to listen closely and tease out the stories' significance are rewarded by increased feelings of competence and an expanded ability to be effective interpreters of and actors upon their environment.

Consider, for example, the disciples' response to the Parable of the Sower. Jesus tells a story about a farmer scattering seed on various types of soil, and then concludes by calling his audience to "hear"--that is, to comprehend the story's meaning and importance. The disciples not only fail to understand the parable's interpretation, but they don't understand why Jesus is using a parable to begin with. Rather than remaining ignorant and abandoning their effort to "hear" as Jesus commanded, though, they approach Jesus and ask him to explain it for them.

In return for their willingness to use the opportunity created by Jesus' telling of the parable (unlike those who heard the parable but did not pursue its meaning), the disciples are given: (a) positive feedback that reinforces their feeling of competence and encourages their autonomy (Matt 13:11, 16-17; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10); (b) information that enhances their ability to understand not only the Parable of the Sower but, at least potentially, all parables (Matt 13:12; Mark 4:13); and (c) an increased awareness of the parable's significance in relation to Jesus' agenda, strengthening the disciples' feelings of relatedness and connection to each other and their shared values.

---

[29]Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 167.

By using a parable to teach, Jesus offered an opportunity to his audience. For many, it was beyond their current level of competency, and so they did not understand the parable and did not attempt to. Note once more that this may or may not have been an intentional consequence of Jesus' method, but even as an unintentional result it still functioned to separate the audience into two groups of people: those who sought understanding and those who did not. For those who sought understanding, the disciples and those with them, the story presented an optimal challenge; that is, comprehension of the parable was slightly beyond their current competency, but they autonomously initiated actions--in this case, approaching Jesus in private and asking for an explanation--aimed at conquering the challenge before them. Those actions resulted in their acquisition of relevant knowledge (the parable's interpretation) as well as increasing their overall level of confidence and encouraging their autonomy in new and more difficult challenges.

Jesus' pedagogical method has been accurately summarized as "communication at the level his audience is prepared to receive."[30] This is the very essence of optimal challenges, and Jesus employs parables as his primary means of providing such optimal challenges to his students.

Competence

Closely related to Jesus' use of parables as optimal challenges is his use of parables to increase the competence of his audience. This comes in two major forms, information and skills. The first of these, the impartation of information, is what we think of as "traditional" education. Jesus has knowledge that his students lack, and part of his task as a teacher is to share that knowledge with them. Again, regardless of whether Jesus intends to hide that knowledge from

[30]Witherington III, *Gospel of Mark*, 166.

some students, there is at least a subset of the audience that is meant to learn from the parables. The facts and concepts learned strengthen their feelings of competence.

The second type of increased competence that results from Jesus' parables is in skills, capacities, and abilities. Either because of the knowledge that is gained from the parable or because of a course of action that was initiated in response to the challenge presented by it, Jesus is able to expand the ways in which his students can interpret and influence their environment. They become better able to understand Jesus' overall mission and its expression in other parables and directives; they internalize Jesus' worldview in such a way that subsequent choices are affected by their values; they become more comfortable recognizing their ignorance and thus more likely to make open inquiries about Jesus' agenda; they even gain specific words and phrases which they can then use to express Jesus' ideas to others. Parables provide Jesus' audience with an opportunity to increase their feelings of competence in such a way that their engagement with their environment is altered.

In the case of the Parable of the Sower, Jesus is very clear about the informational aspect of the story. When the disciples approach him and ask about its meaning, Jesus explicitly outlines the knowledge he intended to impart to the audience. As a result, the disciples gain interpretive experience, an expanded awareness of Jesus' worldview and values, and a set of explanations for why they (like Jesus himself) may not always be successful in their evangelistic and educational efforts. All of these increase their willingness and ability to engage their environment in motivated and meaningful ways.

Autonomy

One of the greatest strengths of Jesus' parable-centered strategy is its support of autonomy. Not only do the challenges offered by Jesus' parables present his audience a choice in how deeply to engage with them (that is, whether to "hear" the stories' significance), but they also provide an opportunity for wide varieties of interpretation and meaning. Very rarely did Jesus give a "right" understanding of his parables; instead, he merely crafted a narrative and left it in the hands of his audience to decipher. A single story can thus impart a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills, determined by each hearer according to the internal and external forces that constitute his or her environment.

Charles Hedrick, one of the most vocal proponents of the polyvalence of parables, describes the open-endedness of narrative in such strong language that he has been charged with promoting a kind of interpretative anarchy:

> As the history of parables interpretation unambiguously shows, parables work any way interpreters and auditors want them to work--in spite of whatever Jesus may have intended with them in their oral early phase. Since we simply do not know how Jesus used parables and clearly have no hope of ever discovering his intention, the issue of how they are used should not be solved by an assumption. It is the nature of narrative to be used any way the storyteller wishes to use it. It is the nature of narrative to lend itself to an auditor's imagination and become whatever the auditor wants it to be--in spite of the narrator's intention. Narratives are essentially polyvalent, and therefore subject to a wide range of readings.[31]

For Hedrick, the very nature of narrative makes individuality of interpretation a critical consideration for both modern students of the Gospels and the first-century audiences that heard Jesus' stories in their original form:

> An explanation is evoked in a particular reader's mind from an engagement with a parable, and responses depend as much on what that interpreter brings to the parable as on what the parable itself says--perhaps more so. Had the interpreter been present in the audience when Jesus first spoke the parable, the situation would have been no different. My hypothetical interpreter, whom I have just taken back in time to the feet of Jesus,

[31]Charles W. Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 102.

> would still have to make sense of the parable as interpreters do today. Then as now, others in the audience would have had rather different responses.[32]

Even in the Parable of the Sower, for which Jesus offers a detailed explanation of each element of the narrative, space remains for each disciple to determine for himself the significance of the story and how it should best be applied. Is the proper response to this parable merely an appreciation for the varieties of response and challenges to sharing God's message? Should the disciples change their lifestyle or method of teaching to counteract the possible obstacles to comprehension that Jesus revealed? Should they simply be more selective about only speaking to receptive and capable audiences, "sowing in good soil" as it were? The disciples are left to formulate their own implementations of the knowledge and values expressed in Jesus' interpretation of the story. By using parables rather than giving explicit instructions, Jesus promotes the autonomy and self-direction of his students.

Relatedness

In addition to increasing his students' feelings of competence and autonomy, Jesus' narrative-oriented pedagogical method also intensifies their feelings of relatedness. The process of interpreting the parables depends on drawing information and meaning out of a story of everyday life, and is thus founded upon recognizing and developing connections between one's environment and the parable's significance. The interpretive process is a dialectic exchange between thinking critically about one's experiences (of sowing seed, or buying a field, or working in a vineyard, and so forth) in order to find meaning in the parable and thinking critically about the meaning one assigns to the parable and how it influences one's experiences.

[32]Hedrick, *Many Things*, 102.

The number of possible connections to be found in parables is virtually limitless, restricted only by the internal and external forces that form the operating environment of a specific individual.

The Parable of the Sower, for example, offers a wide variety of elements with which the disciples may choose to identify, deepening their sense of connection. They could experience a stronger feeling of relatedness to one another as joint members of an "in" crowd with special access to Jesus' teaching. They could identify themselves with any of the various soil types and the challenges represented by them. They could compare their productivity as disciples to the various yields of crops grown in good soil. Opposition is also a valid relationship, and so they could define themselves by their orientation against the word-stealing efforts of the "evil one." The possible connections between the disciples and their environments are enormously diverse, and, in keeping with the autonomy that sits at the core of Self-Determination Theory, the parable's relational significance for each individual is determined by his response to the influence of internal and external forces.

Implications for the Classroom

Based on the writings of the Gospel authors, Jesus' reputation as an effective and engaging teacher was well-earned. He developed a significant following, despite (or perhaps as a result of) his unique pedagogical strategy of using simple narratives or pictures of everyday life to impart spiritual truths. The very nature of these parables left their interpretation and application up to his audience, providing them with an opportunity--but not a requirement--to choose how and why to engage the world around and within them.

There are many lessons to be learned from Jesus' example in this regard, and many ways in which those lessons can be implemented in our own educational settings. Some applications

may be quite direct; those who teach about the parables of Jesus, for example, can provide Self-Determination Theory as a viable analytical tool and explore the interpretive consequences of its use as we have done here with the Parable of the Sower.

Other applications may not be quite so straightforward as this, such as changes to our methods of instruction and assessment. Statements of fact (e.g., Paul spent X days in Y city) can be replaced by narratives (e.g., the story of Paul's first missionary journey), encouraging students to discover and decide for themselves which are the most salient aspects of a passage, and why that is the case. Questions posed in the classroom can direct students' attention not only to the information found in various texts and resources (e.g., what does Mark say about _____?), but also require them to call upon their own experience and sense of self to formulate their answers (e.g., why do you think Mark says so? Do you agree?).

In some cases, emulation of Jesus' autonomy-supporting teaching method requires less of a change in the classroom environment and more of a change in our perception of and engagement with students themselves. In any situation, we can ask ourselves the question, "How can I support this student's autonomy," or, "How can I help this student feel more competent and capable," or, "How can I help this student build meaningful connections?"

By recognizing the inherent psychological need of our students to make their own choices about what actions are significant and how to engage in those actions, we mirror the educational strategy of Jesus and follow the example of a remarkable teacher.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

deCharms, R. *Personal Causation: The Internal Affective Determinants of Behavior*. New York: Academic, 1968.

Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum, 1985.

Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. "The 'What' and 'Why' of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior." *Psychological Inquiry* 11, 4 (2000): 228-267.

Dodd, C. H. *The Parables of the Kingdom*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961.

Donahue, John R. *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988.

Hedrick, Charles W. *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.

Hedrick, Charles W. *Many Things in Parables*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004.

Herzog II, William R. *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994.

Perkins, Pheme. *Jesus as Teacher*. New York: Cambridge, 1990.

Snodgrass, Klyne R. "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus." *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*. Edited by Richard N. Longenecker. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000.

Stein, Robert H. *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994.

White, R. W. "Motivation Reconsidered: The Concept of Competence." *Psychological Review* 66 (1959): 297-333.

Witherington III, Ben. *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.