

# Transformation: An Examination of Jesus' Creative Use of the Matthew 13 Parables and Theory U

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This paper on transformation examines how Matthew portrays Jesus using the parables of Matthew 13 to surprise hearers/readers into transforming their paradigm regarding the kingdom of heaven so that they enter into the kingdom and gain keys to bring the purposes of heaven to the earth. This transformation involves seeing, hearing, and understanding the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. This process begins by seeing Jesus as the new Torah. Scharmer's Theory U provides a pattern for leaders and followers to let go of present understandings, "see" and presence emerging reality, and then crystallize and prototype the emerging vision to bring it to reality. Theory U is discussed as a parallel leadership theory that provides tools to bring forth emerging realities on the earth, and then extends the theory to the kingdom. Individual transformation is not enough; it needs to be propagated into others. As Christian leaders we need to see the emerging realities of the universe and the kingdom, define the vision, teach our followers this process, and then participate to bring the new possibilities into reality.

Grannell posits "If the key to understanding God's transforming presence in this world lies in being grasped by what we see rather than in continuing to see what we already know, then the key to Jesus' transforming message lies primarily in his parables" (1985, p. 385). He asserts it is only as followers seek out the complete meaning of the "mysteries" (see Matthew 13:11, 34-35, 51-52) that we will be transformed by understanding and responding to God's active participation in this world. Transformation happens when one is confronted by the unexpected. The parables in Matthew 13 use this principle to elicit mindset changes. This essay does not concentrate on the content of the parables. Rather it examines how Jesus creatively uses parables to unveil the truth of His mission (the kingdom) and the cost and value of participating or not participating in it. The multitudes and disciples are challenged to move from their previous mindset (formation) to an unexpected and emerging one

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(transformation). This view is briefly compared to Theory U, (Scharmer, 2007) a contemporary leadership theory on transformation. This is an extensive topic and assumes the reader has basic Biblical understanding.

### Transformation versus Formation

Both formation and transformation are required in balance according to Grannell (1985). He quotes Rosemary Haughton's paradox, "Without the long process of formation, there could be no transformation; yet no amount of careful formation can transform" (p. 384). Haughton sees formation in *chronos* time and transformation in *kairos* time. She believes the personality is formed in stages through "time-conditioned" formation, and then transformation occurs as a "timeless" point of decision (p. 386). Grannell quoting Fowler states that "without the long process of formation, there could be no transformation" (p. 384). He quotes Loder to define transformation as "being 'grasped' by God" and gaining a "new knowledge about God, self, and world" which results in a "radically new sense of reality" (p. 387). Thus to Grannell formation is the life-long learning process that sets the stage for moments of transformation to break in and alter the paradigm of reality. This paper will focus on transformation.

### Theory U

*Theory U* (2007) is Scharmer's leadership theory on letting go of old mindsets to embrace an emerging reality that requires the leader's participation to make it happen. He presents Theory U as a process that "pulls us into an emerging possibility and allows us to operate from the altered state rather than simply reflecting on and reacting to past experiences" and defines leaders as "people who engage in creating or shaping their future" (p.5). Senge (2007, xv) in the Forward quotes Arie de Geus, that when people living inside a shifting reality begin to "see" what was previously unseen and "see" their own part in maintaining the old and inhibiting or denying the new, the dam begins to break. This is a definition of transformation breaking into the present reality that has been formed linearly over time in individuals, organizations, and society. Theory U posits the need for an open mind, open heart, and an open will to "see" this new reality (Scharmer, 2007, 40).

### Parables

Thayer's (2000) defines the Greek meaning of parable (*paraballoo*) as: juxtaposing two things or comparing things metaphorically. The kingdom of heaven (A) is compared to people or objects (B). The important (sometimes unasked) question becomes how the hearers/readers (C) compare to (B). Parables contain paradoxes and confront the expectations of the hearer/reader (Crossan, 2002). Therefore the hearer/reader must discover the hidden meaning and application to their life, which is the invitation to transform their thinking and actions. Senge suggests that effective leaders have creative tension, this is the ability to hold concurrently their vision and frankly look at current reality (2006, 340). Hearer/readers of the parables must do this.

Jesus knew the Hebrew scriptures, yet He creates this new parable genre<sup>i</sup> specifically to reveal the truth of how to live in the kingdom. He taught orally by repetition, so in all likelihood He repeated the same parables in different settings (Kistemaker, 2005). Jesus' parables are timeless and universal because they touch people of all ages, nationalities, and races. Kistemaker adds they demonstrate "artistry in their unity, coherence, balance, contrast, recurrence, and symmetry." Since Jesus' parables are divinely inspired, they carry authority.

### Interpreting Parables

Over the centuries the methodologies for interpreting Jesus' parables have varied. Stein (1985) admirably reiterates the history of parabolic interpretation from the Early Church's use of allegory, through the Middle Ages and Reformation, and to the Modern period which prefers a literal interpretation. He asserts the parables importance because they were created by Jesus and "recorded (and interpreted) by his apostles" (p.253). McIver (1995) researched the pros and cons of the universalist and ecclesiastical interpretations for the parable of the wheat and tares (13: 24-30, 36-43). Oakman as quoted by Crossan (2002) suggests the parables were to present the need for justice, social change, and transformation. However, it is important to note the first interpreters were the gospel writers who chose which material to include under Holy Spirit's inspiration.<sup>ii</sup> Redaction criticism examines how they "arranged, shaped, and interpreted the traditions in light of their own theological emphases" (Stein, p. 251). Handy calls this reframing, which is "the ability to see things, problems, situations, or people in other ways, to look at them sideways, or upside-down; to put them in another perspective or another context; to think of them as opportunities not problems" (1990, p. 65).

While interpretative methodologies can reframe the parables, Stein (1985) emphasizes parables are more than a tool or example; they carry "creative power" to grasp the reader. Stein suggests they have meaning beyond what Jesus or the evangelists intended; and have numerous and equally valid meanings because they are revelatory truth from the heart of God. He further states, "It is therefore not the reader who interprets the parables but rather the parables which interpret them!" (p. 254). He adds that the "truth" of parables changes lives, not because of mystical words, but because they carry the reality of God in the parables. Therefore they have the capability of reframing our understanding of reality.

Stein (1985) observes that parables require the hearer/reader to think through their experience in light of the truth of the parable. Thus the exegete must have the "mind of Christ" and Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:13-16) to hear the voice of Jesus in the parables to prevent subjectivity from entering the interpretation. Bailey quoting Hagner notes, "The key issue is responsiveness or non-responsiveness to the message of the kingdom" (1998, footnote 65). Therefore the hearer/reader must actively think to see, hear, and understand the parables and then apply them.

## Matthew 13

D. deSilva states the Gospel of Matthew has “traditionally been ascribed to Matthew, one of the twelve apostles” (2004, p. 234). He adds that Matthew reveals Jesus as miracle worker, healer, and deliverer, but his primary view is Jesus as the interpreter of Torah who teaches followers **how** to walk pleasing to God. Weaver (2008) quotes from Witherington’s commentary that Matthew “will argue that Jesus himself, rather than Torah, is the incarnation of God’s wisdom, and that it is therefore Jesus’ own wise teaching that provides the hermeneutical key to understanding Law, proverb, prophecy, parable, and other things” (p. 86). Witherington concludes, “The Gospel is eternally true” and a “livable and useful truth,” and that the believer is “to fulfill all righteousness as Jesus did, and this call is not Law, but Wisdom” (p.86). Both commentators agree Matthew presents Jesus re-“presenting” truth to provide followers a practical way to walk.

Matthew furnishes a clear conception of who is inside the community and who is not (McIver, 1995). Bailey (1998) demonstrates that chapter 13 structurally demarks this line, since it directly follows the Jewish leaders unbelieving response (11:16-24) and rejection of Jesus (12:14).

The first four parables (*The Sower, Wheat and Tares, Mustard Seed, and Leaven*) are presented to the multitudes which includes the disciples (13:34). Jesus presents the last three (*Parables of the Hidden Treasure, Pearl of Great Price, and Dragnet*) and the interpretations only to the disciples (13:36), those who choose to be in the community of believers.

### The Sower

*The Sower* is the first parable. It is presented to the multitudes and is the only parable in Matthew 13 that does **not** start “The kingdom of heaven is like ...” The parable and the interpretation are also separated by a discourse on who sees, hears, and understands and who does not. Therefore it must have a unique function.

Bailey (1998) asserts that Matthew 13 warns the Jewish leaders of the dangers of not receiving the kingdom, in the person of Jesus. Jesus states in 13:13 that He speaks in parables **because** the multitudes don’t see, hear, or understand. Jesus recontextualizes a quote from Isaiah 6:8-13 stating the prophecy is now fulfilled (see 13:14-15).<sup>iii</sup> In contrast, the disciples are being entrusted with the “mysteries of the kingdom” (13:11-12) and have the ability to see, hear, and therefore understand beyond what many prophets and righteous men desired (13:16-17). The implication is that because the disciples receive Jesus their eyes, ears, hearts are open to receive the wisdom to understand. Bailey notes that “mystery” is appropriate because this concept of the kingdom of God is a new revelation that has not been seen or heard previously.

Each hearer/reader of *The Sower* decides what type of soil they are and will become based on their decisions today. Achtemeier suggests that *The Sower* “stands as an invitation and guide to a process of self-examination leading to repentance (Bromiley, 1985, 642)<sup>iv</sup> and renewed discipleship” (1990, 61-65). Therefore it becomes a lens through which to view the remaining kingdom parables.

Scharmer defines the *social field* as the place of a deliberate shift in thinking and action that is a result of connecting to a “deeper source of creativity and knowing” and moves beyond the past (2007, p. 4). Interestingly, he compares this to soil (pp. 8-10). Soil has two aspects: the visible seen above the ground, and the invisible or unseen below the surface. The visible topsoil is a result of the quality of and preparation of the invisible soil. The process of cultivation (plowing) deepens the connection between the visible and invisible. Since Jesus asserts that followers must actively choose which type of soil they are for the seed of the kingdom, then followers are responsible for a deeper connection to Jesus through repentance (plowing of the hard heart) to produce a 100 fold return. Scharmer states transformation at the individual or organizational level is predominantly invisible to the eye.

### Kingdom of Heaven

Previously in Matthew, the kingdom was preached and taught openly to the multitudes by John (3:2), Jesus (4:17, 23; 5:1-7; 9:35. 11:1), and the disciples (10:7). After chapter 13 Jesus no longer preaches (*kerysso*) (Bromiley, 1985, p. 430) the kingdom to the multitudes, but only speaks or babbles (*laleo*) (p. 506) in parables (13:34-35). Jacobson (1990) notes, that Jesus’ ongoing compassion for the multitudes is evident by his continued healings and miracles. The author asserts these demonstrations prove that the kingdom is “at hand.” In Matthew, Jesus does not “teach” (*didasko*) the parables, this word is reserved for the Lord’s instruction of the Torah (Bailey, 1998), which is another indicator that God and His kingdom as revealed in the parables are beyond the Torah. In 13:51-52, after the disciples respond they understand, Jesus calls them “scribe”<sup>v</sup> of the kingdom of heaven who understand new and old treasures. This implies they will be the interpreters not only of Torah, but also the truth of the new “Torah,” Jesus.

Jesus speaks differently to his disciples so they will see, hear, and understand the kingdom (His mission). Greenleaf, identified “servant leaders” by their motivation to grow other leaders who are “healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants.” (Senge, 2006, p. 329). It is only when a leader is able to duplicate the values and purpose in other leaders that sustainable results will be achieved. As Jesus’ values and vision of the kingdom (the new Torah) are propagated in his disciples, they are able to replicate them in others.

Ryken et al. states that although the phrases the “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” do not appear in the Hebrew scriptures, the theme of “kingship” or “kingly rule of God”<sup>vi</sup> is prevalent in the prophets and poets. “God’s kingship or kingdom is the prevailing pattern in the fabric of Israel’s identity” (1998, p. 479). Israel longs for the good news that God’s kingship is established in Israel. Thus when Jewish listeners hear the term “kingdom of heaven” their expectation is for God to rule on the earth.

McIver (1995) asserts that most scholars believe the “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew is synonymous with the “kingdom of God” in the other gospels which represents God’s reign on the

earth. Mclver's research provides arguments of numerous scholars who disagree or substantiate this view.

In addition, Mclver presents a non-traditional interpretation of the kingdom. The Hebrew scriptures view the "kingdom of God" as the reign of God which people need to recognize,<sup>vii</sup> therefore it is not "at hand"<sup>viii</sup> or "entered."<sup>ix</sup> He posits that the Christian scriptures rarely speak of God as king or establishing a kingdom. Instead, Jesus speaks of God as father (relationship). The Greek words for king (*basileus*) or to reign (*basileuo*) do not appear with the concept of kingdom.<sup>x</sup> He suggests the text naturally reads in terms of a territory or realm. He strongly asserts "the kingdom of God is manifest in the present through the community of Jesus disciples" and this community "is the realm or territory that corresponds to the kingdom" (p. 658). Thus Mclver states that the future blessings of the kingdom are manifesting in the present through His disciples (p. 659).

As evidence Mclver cites Matthew 16:17-19, where the keys of the kingdom are given. Here kingdom (*basileia*) and church (*ekklesia*) are juxtaposed. Mclver posits the keys represent more than authority; they open access to a present realm: the kingdom. This interpretation is consistent with the whole of Matthew. The Beatitudes indicate that the poor in spirit and persecuted will "enter" the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5: 3, 10). In Matthew 23:13, the Pharisees use keys to lock the kingdom to prevent others from entering in and refuse to enter themselves. Ryken et al.'s (1998) description substantiates this view. He asserts keys symbolize power because they are given to trustworthy people and provide access. "A key (even in ancient times) is a relatively small thing compared to that which it opens. Thus it suggests something of power, mystery, and exclusivity" (p.476). He notes the church's kingdom keys unlock kingdom actions on the earth and in heaven, and link the earthly and heavenly realms in one operation. Thus the church possesses keys to open and close the kingdom of heaven.<sup>xi</sup> The church's **now** role is to unlock the kingdom, enter in, and bring it to the earth.

## Theory U

The left side of Scharmer's U (see Figure 1) is the process of letting go of old perceptions as one begins to see an emerging reality. The key step is the bottom of the U, *presencing* which is a blend of sensing and presence. He defines this as connecting deeply to "the Source of the highest future possibility and to bring it into the now." (2007, p. 163). This is the root of creativity for him. Presencing happens when the presence of the past (current field), the presence of the future (emerging field of the future), and the presence of one's authentic Self merge and resonate together. This is where profound shifts or transformation occur.



Figure 1: Theory U (Adapted from Scharmer, 2007, Figure 2.5, p. 38)

He is listening to the universe (p. 424) or *collective global field* (p. 444). This is at a soul level (mind, heart, and will). It is powerful and real.

The final steps of Theory U involve crystallizing the vision and intention, prototyping the visions, and then achieving results by implementing practices and infrastructure to perform the vision which he calls co-creation. He notes that most leaders operate at the upper levels of the U without delving into the sensing, presencing, crystallizing phases. However, when leaders move in these deeper levels, phenomenal results that transform not only individuals, but organizations and society can occur.

#### Theory U+

Loehr & Schwartz (2003) note the need for spiritual energy to be motivated to transform. They define *spiritual* not in a religious sense, but the deeply held values and purpose that go beyond self interest that provide motivation, perseverance, and direction. The “key muscle that that fuels spiritual energy is character—the courage and conviction to love by our values, even when doing so requires sacrifice and hardship. Supportive spiritual muscles include passion, commitment, integrity and honesty” (p.110). This supports Scharmer’s theory of open mind, heart, and will.

But as Christian leaders, the soul level should not be enough. I would argue we need to connect at the level of the spirit or kingdom that Jesus presents in the parables. We are given the opportunity to connect with the manifest presence of God at this foundational level (see 1 Corinthians 3:9-15, Matthew 7:24-27). Our source of creativity is the Creator. If one extends Theory U further to Theory U+, then the next step is an open spirit which sees the emerging kingdom and brings spiritual transformation through repentance. Senge (2006, 13) calls a “fundamental shift” *metanoia*, the Greek work that is translated as repentance in the Christian scriptures. He takes the root word *meta* (above or beyond) and *noia* (mind) to call it transcendence of the mind. To Scharmer and Senge this is the universe. I would argue “the Source” is God which is revealed in Jesus the Torah and Biblical repentance brings transformation to one’s authentic Self which includes our spirit. This relates to Grannell’s quote of Loder earlier that transformation creates a new understanding of “God, self, and the world” (1985, p. 387).

Senge (2006) comments, “New insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting” (p. 163). Scharmer quoting Darwin notes that the human mind tends to forget what does not fit into familiar frameworks (2007, p. 133). Jesus presents the kingdom of heaven in a framework that the Jews did not expect. This is true for Christian leaders as well, the kingdom as a realm to enter in the present has not been taught widely. As Christians, an open spirit is critical to “see” or presence what God is speaking and doing (see John 5:19-20) in the emerging future. When we see the universe’s and God’s reality juxtaposed, we crystallize or define what is the vision we will act toward. Then we co-create with God using the keys of the kingdom to prototype and bring it forth as in Scharmer’s model.

To achieve this we must overcome barriers to see, embrace, and enter into the kingdom, and then move out of it as the source of “deeper” reality. Scharmer states that “the capacity for seeing is difficult for individuals to develop, it is even more challenging in the collective context of organizations. Yet it is a critical function for leading change. Some say it is *the* critical function” (p.134). He calls presencing passing through the eye of the needle, a Biblical term for a place of difficult passage (Matthew 19:24). Therefore the ability of Jesus’ disciples and today’s Christian leaders to shift their paradigm of reality to “see” the kingdom is a key to unlocking God’s emerging reality. To those who do not “see,” it will seem incomprehensible, just as the Pharisees perceived the parables as babbling.

The parables of Jesus provide a vehicle to “see” God and His kingdom in the emerging reality. Hendricks (1998) quotes Julian of Norwich, “The one thing that matters is that we always say ‘yes’ to God whenever we experience Him” (p. 132). As Christian leaders we say ‘yes’ by using the kingdom keys to hear the voice of Jesus and access the present reality of the kingdom of heaven thereby linking the actions of this world to it.

## Conclusions

Jesus introduced parables to challenge His disciples to think in a new paradigm. This mindset transformed their understanding of Torah, Jesus, and how to access the kingdom of heaven in the current time/space continuum. The resulting Wisdom taught them how to respond in unexpected situations such as Pentecost (Acts 2) or Peter’s recurring vision (Acts 10). It also provided them perseverance to endure and operate in persecution, hardships, and unprecedented growth as evidenced in Acts and Revelation. Jesus throughout Matthew 13 asked or implied open ended questions. These are directed to the disciples and those of the multitude who desired to understand. The purpose is to shift the followers into alignment with His mission of the kingdom. Either they see and shift to the emerging reality He is teaching or they leave. Jesus knew that those who choose to reject Him would not see or enter this paradigm.

Jesus did this creatively. First His creative essence was in the parables. Secondly, He drew the hearer/reader into the parable, and then expected them to reflect on how their life compared to the parable. As the disciples gained understanding of the new paradigm, He instructed them to become interpreters of the new reality to others. Transformation in them was not enough; it needed to be propagated into others. Jesus knew this was preparation to take the mission “to all nations” and to understand that He and His kingdom are accessible even when He became visibly absent on the earth (28:18-20).

Theory U provides a vehicle for leaders to understand a process for transformation that looks to the future rather than the past. It is a very useful model to understand transformation at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. When we extend Theory U to Theory U+, then we have a deeper source in the U process to find answers – God.

How can we as Christian leaders learn from Jesus' creative use of parables and Theory U? We can learn to reframe the reality of our organization for ourselves and our followers. In this process of reframing, we *presence* the emerging reality in the universe combined with seeing, hearing, and understanding the emerging reality of the kingdom. When we see these realities juxtaposed, we crystallize or define what the vision is that we will act toward. As we prototype and perform, we use the keys of the kingdom to bring the kingdom of heaven to the earth to transform the present reality here. As we model this for our followers as Jesus did, then this process can be propagated in our followers who go and do likewise.<sup>xii</sup>

Do you see God's kingdom as part of the process of transformation? How are you implementing these principles in your life and leadership setting?

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Crossan states the parabolic genre is “absent in the Hebrew Bible and Hellenistic literature,” lacking in the Pharisee traditions, and “rare in early Christian traditions.”

Kistemaker (2005, 49-55) added that rabbinic parables were application of the Law and interpretations of scriptural passages and contained themes of God as king or his kingdom as described above. Because the rabbinic parables lacked inspiration they were generally unknown. Nathan’s parable of the lost ewe to bring King David to repentance (2 Samuel 12:1-4) is a Hebrew scriptures example.

<sup>ii</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16.

<sup>iii</sup> It is interesting to note that the Isaiah 6:9-10 passage follows Isaiah’s recognition of God for who He is, His repentance in “Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips,” God’s question “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us,” Isaiah’s response of “Here am I! Send Me.” This context would be well known to the Jewish audience. Verses 9-10 is a proclamation Isaiah is to give (future) to the people rejecting God which dulls their heart, makes ears heavy, and shuts their eyes further.

Jesus is stating specifically that this prophecy is fulfilled in the Jewish leaders having chosen to reject Jesus. He changes the last part of the Isaiah passage from “return and be healed” to “turn, so that I might heal them.” This is a strong declaration of who He is.

<sup>iv</sup> The usual meaning of repentance (*metanoia*) is “change of mind” or conversion.

<sup>v</sup> “A scholar of the Old Testament,” footnote in NKJV text, 1431.

<sup>vi</sup> Psalms 22:28; 103:19, 145:11-13; Daniel 2:44, 4:3, 7:27.

<sup>vii</sup> Aalen (*Reign and House*, 217-19) is quoted in Mclver.

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 10:7. 10:7-8 indicates the evidence of the kingdom of heaven being manifest is “Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.”

<sup>ix</sup> Matthew 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23.

<sup>x</sup> Ladd (*Presence of the Future*, 134-36) quoted by Mclver cites Rev. 17:12 appearing to be a counter example. Seven earthly kings have not received their kingdoms because they have not gained authority. “In other words. the kingdom was the territory over which he ruled, not his ruling.” The author would add this is referring to earthly kings not God’s rule.

<sup>xi</sup> The author submits another example. Revelation 4:1 and 11:12 invite John to “Come up here” and enter through a door in heaven. He responds, “Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven” (Revelation 4:2). Perhaps John used the keys of the kingdom to enter heaven.

<sup>xii</sup> Luke 10:37