

## Thinking Allowed...

by Gene Parr

If one of our students were to ask us to define the parables of Jesus, our response would probably include the age-old phrase “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning” and the concept that this was Jesus’ primary public teaching method.

What we might fail to appreciate is just how secular these stories are. To us, they have become simply spiritual messages and all the more so because of our two thousand year distance from that culture. What we do know is that the parables entertained the crowd. They captured the attention of the people Jesus wanted to reach. They were controversial. Only one of them has someone religious in it (the scribe and lawyer that gives the beaten and robbed Jew wide berth before the arrival of the good Samaritan).

Apparently Jesus felt very comfortable using the cultural world around Him to connect people with the spiritual truth He came to give. Now, we face a conflict some are calling “worship wars.” It is a conflict involving music (organ or praise band), drama (or not) and messages (traditional or seeker sensitive).

For those of us on the state university campus, it seems we have little choice, we must speak to our “mission field” in their language, their music and their cultural stories. Some of the key points Jesus makes by His use of secular stories is that His message is relevant, timely and very personal. We must do no less.

Along these lines, one of the big things for some students in our campus culture, is the approaching premier (just in time for Christmas) of the first of *The Lord of the Rings* movies. There are to be three installments over the next three Christmases. Already some bookstores are selling out and reordering these books by J.R.R. Tolkein. While Tolkein (a devout Catholic) did not write these books as allegories of Christian faith, they are stories of redemption, self-denial and grace. Recently, Ralph Wood of Baylor University on a Mars Hill audio journal related how students who took his class on Tolkein and C.S. Lewis

would remark upon their completed reading of *The Lord of the Rings*, that they somehow felt “clean.” I suspect that may be a new feeling for many in this generation.

It is significant to note that Tolkien (according to Lewis in his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*) was one of the people God used to befriend and attract C. S. Lewis to Christ. Lewis, the atheist, believed Christianity was based on a myth. His studies had revealed to him that almost every culture has a myth about a god who dies and comes back to life again. Tolkien convinced him that the myth really came true once. Who can measure the impact of Lewis on our generation? Could one of our students be the next Lewis? Could you or I be the one God uses to befriend that student and make Christianity both palatable and plausible?