

Introduction

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:21–28)

It’s an amazing story. Here is Jesus, the good shepherd, wonder-worker extraordinaire, refusing to heal. His mission as he understands it is clear: go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel—that is, to other Jews who are in need of physical and spiritual healing. Given the enormity of this task, Jesus doesn’t seem to have time or energy left to expend on such pagan “dogs” as the distraught woman who was so desperately pleading her case before him. After what seems like an initial attempt to duck the whole confrontation, he tells her so.

Compelled by her daughter’s desperate need, the woman won’t take “no” for an answer. In a masterful example of debating skill, she ignores the insult and turns Jesus’ logic against him. “Lord,” she says, “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table of their masters’ table.” And then Jesus changes his mind. Now he really sees this woman for who she is—not a person distant from God but one who is able to see the divine presence in him clearly, more so, perhaps, than he does himself! Now the miraculous transformation flows effortlessly through Jesus and into the woman’s life.

A Model for the Church

Some years ago I wrote a reflection on this story for *U.S. Catholic* magazine. In response, a friend made an interesting observation: wouldn't it be something, he wrote, if this story could serve as a model for the Church? Just as Jesus himself could change his mind on fundamental issues when the needs of the people demanded it, so could the Church. His letter made me think: could this be the reason this gospel story was preserved in the first place?

One of the many insights into the development of the New Testament brought to light by Bible scholars in the past century (and incorporated into mainstream Catholic teaching through the Vatican Council II) is that the gospels are not biographies, as we know them today, of Jesus of Nazareth. (I will review the process of development in more detail in Chapter One). Over the course of several generations following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the first Christians preserved stories about Jesus' miraculous healings and memories of his teachings through the process of oral tradition. During this time, these stories were edited and reshaped to serve the particular needs of various Christian communities.

When the gospel writers began their work, they once again edited the material available to them and selected only some of the rich traditions about Jesus that existed. The author of John's gospel tells us this explicitly: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30–31).

But back to that gospel story: with so much to choose from, and with the stated intention of fostering belief in Jesus, why would any of the evangelists include a story that highlights Jesus' reluctance to work a miracle? The answer to this question, and the basic premise for this book, is that from the beginning Christians have understood that the image of the Holy Spirit as "wind and fire" during that first Pentecost (Acts 2), conveys a profound truth. Just as fire and wind are powerful and unpredictable, so is God.

As the first Jewish disciples of the risen Christ struggled to reinterpret their traditional beliefs about how the Messiah would reveal himself, the community gradually came to understand much more deeply

how incomprehensibly different God's ways can be than our ways. To remain faithful as a community, these first Christians and all of their spiritual descendants would have to let go of everything at a moment's notice if discipleship required it—even preconceived notions of how God ought to act and what the Church ought to look like. Just as Jesus himself redefined his mission in the light of real circumstances—the need of the Canaanite women—the Church too must continually redefine itself.

The Obstacle of Fundamentalism

Again and again, two types of fundamentalism try to drive a wedge between the Christian community and the Holy Spirit, crippling our ability to be disciples of Christ. The first is biblical fundamentalism, which takes an overly simplistic view of the Bible as a single literary work almost untouched by human hands and written by a single author—God. It rejects a deeper understanding of the books of the Bible as the result of a complex process of development that took place over centuries. This type of fundamentalism has been unambiguously and consistently rejected by the Catholic Church in modern as well as ancient times.

The second kind of fundamentalism, however, has been much more bedeviling for Catholics. Just as biblical fundamentalism takes an overly simplistic view of the Bible, “ecclesial” fundamentalism takes an overly simplistic view of the Church. More specifically, it tends to distort the meaning of apostolic succession. This is the belief that the “deposit of faith” containing essential Christian teaching on faith and morals has been handed down in an unbroken line starting with the twelve apostles and continuing through their successors, the bishops and the popes.

Ecclesial fundamentalism sees this process of apostolic succession as taking place in a hermetically sealed vacuum. Nothing can get in or out. Even when the presentation of doctrine in one era contradicts the presentation of doctrine in another, ecclesial fundamentalists ignore or disclaim this. And the idea that the Holy Spirit might also be speaking through those not in ordained ministry, incorporated in the term *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) is dismissed as heresy.

This kind of fundamentalist thinking is vividly illustrated in a notorious quote attributed to Pope Pius IX, whose papacy encompassed a

good part of the nineteenth century. When the pope was questioned by an advisor who felt a particular pronouncement of his might not be consistent with tradition, Pius angrily responded, “I am tradition!” In reality, the Church has been challenged time and time again throughout its history to reinvent itself in order to remain faithful to the mission entrusted to it by Jesus.

Sometimes changes have come from the “bottom up,” as when the faithful arrive where the Holy Spirit is leading long before the magisterium realizes it’s time to pack. Other times have been from the “top down” as the pope and bishops must lead the community into extremely unpopular terrain or must set boundaries beyond which true Christian communion would be impossible. Most often change occurs as a result of “the dance.” The Holy Spirit gently but profoundly moves both the faithful and the magisterium in prayerful—and sometimes not so prayerful—discernment in order to bring to light that fuller understanding of the Christian faith or *sensus fidei* (distinct from the *sensus fidelium*). Church history is a dynamic and often messy process through which the Holy Spirit is calling the body of Christ to change. Understanding and accepting this is the only sure antidote to ecclesial fundamentalism.

This process of constantly discerning what is Tradition and thus from God and what is merely changeable human custom has been going on within the Church since the beginning. In this book, we’ll simplify things by focusing on eight dramatic turning points through which former ways of being Church gave way to new models. Often these changes were made to address new needs in changing times. Sometimes they were thrust upon the Church by history. In some cases the transformation can be seen clearly. In other cases it remains a struggle to understand the implications.

The purpose of this book is to help you see what you already know in your heart and have experienced in your own life. We are all a bit like the man who had five theories about raising children and then quickly became the man with five children and no theories! Change is inevitable and some theories drop away with change as others develop with change. Jesus calls us to courageously follow him, but he rarely passes out roadmaps. When we walk together, caught up in the Spirit, and not in our preconceived notions about what it means to be Church, we always find our way, two thousand years and counting.