

Overturning Everything

The ancient world was built on three fundamental realities—foundations which persist to this day—and Christ overturned all of them. No wonder His Church was considered both radical and dangerous.

The first reality was the foundation of family. Loyalty to one's family—and by extension to one's clan, tribe, or nation—was paramount, and trumped every other personal loyalty. That was because in a big and dangerous world, extended family was often the only place of safety and security, and when all else failed, you could always go home and find the warmth, food, and protection not found elsewhere. It is little wonder, therefore, that loyalty to one's family, tribe, and people was the unquestioned foundation of everything that one later built on in one's life.

One can imagine then how Christ's words about how personal loyalty to Him trumped even loyalty to family would have sounded to His contemporaries. "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of Me" (*Matthew 10:37*). More astonishing still is the variant of this saying in *Luke 14:26*: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple".

Knowing that the word "hate" here means not "emotional loathing", but "a decision to reject" scarcely removes the scandal and the sting. Christ demands a personal loyalty that up-ends everything, overthrowing the foundations on which all life in society was built. In the tightly-knit and intensely tribal world of first-century Judaism where family and loyalty to one's Jewish people were fundamental to name and identity, it was jaw-dropping. And, His enemies doubtless pointed out, more than a little arrogant for a mere human being. (Discerning Christians may detect in these sayings yet another of Jesus' claims to divinity.)

Christians who accepted this Dominical demand and gave Jesus their complete and unlimited loyalty therefore formed a new family. This loyalty to Christ formed the foundation of the Church, which consisted of those men, women, and children who belonged no longer to the world with its tribes, but to Jesus and the Kingdom of God—and therefore to one another. Christ up-ended the worldly reality of family in order to replace it with an eschatological one.

So, although we of course love our earthly families, our ultimate and true family members are our fellow Christians. Therefore, for example, a Christian in Ukraine will regard a fellow Christian in Russia as his true family, rather than a fellow Ukrainian who is not a Christian. The eschatological nature of the Church is thus no abstract concept, but one that challenges us and the way we live in this world.

The second worldly reality is purpose of power. We see this purpose and paradigm overturned repeatedly in our Lord's ministry. In the world, power was intended to serve one's own will and further one's own agenda. We see this everywhere around us: in every company and group The Boss is the one who gets his way. Power consists of power over others. But among our Lord's disciples, it was not to be so.

James and John learned this to their cost towards the end of Christ's earthly ministry. Being told by Him that the Kingdom of God was imminent and that it would come after they had reached Jerusalem to which they were travelling, they not unnaturally assumed that the Kingdom would be an earthly one, complete with first and second places, worldly rank, privileges, perks, and all the other accoutrements of the rich elite. They knew that Peter functioned among the Twelve as the leader, and they wanted to oust him and grab the first and second spots for themselves. They therefore approached Him privately (*Matthew's* version of the story reveals that they got their mother to do it for them!) and asked that He promise that they would have the highest places in the new regime for themselves (no doubt intending to fob Peter off with a nice portfolio).

Our Lord informed them that they didn't know what they were talking about, for their assumption that the Kingdom would be a worldly one with worldly perks was erroneous. But He did not simply refuse their request, but revealed that their whole concept of power was wrong. "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord

it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you: but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (*Mark 10:42-43*).

They were slow to learn the lesson, and their last meal together before our Lord’s arrest and crucifixion still found them fighting over first places at the table, with no one wanting to perform the task of the lowest by washing the feet of the others. Our Lord therefore performed that task, laying aside His garments, girding Himself with a towel, kneeling before them, and washing their feet. As their astonished faces burned with shame, He explained that although He was their Lord and Teacher, He was not ashamed to wash their feet to give them an example of service. The servant was not greater than his master, and so they must also wash one another’s feet in the time to come (*Luke 22:24-27, John 13:4-17*).

This was not simply about foot-washing or humility or ego. It was about a whole new way of using power. Among His disciples, power, authority, and rank were to be used solely for the service of others, and not for the advancement of one’s own will. What mattered was not personal agenda, but the good of others, the common welfare. In the Church, a new paradigm must prevail, a new and revolutionary approach to power. (Later Church history would record how well and often this new approach was actually used. The internet records how well it is used today.)

The third worldly reality which Christ overturned was that of the reality of religion. That is, He overturned the notion that to worship God one needed sacrifices, altars, temples, priests, holy places, holy calendars, and holy rules determining what and who was clean or unclean.

We see this clearly in His extraordinary exchange with a woman of Samaria. As a Samaritan she was convinced that the sacrifices had to be offered by priests on an altar on Mount Gerizim, and that the Jews were wrong when they thought that the sacrifices had to be offered by Levitical priests on the altar on Mount Zion. Christ swept the whole thing away when He retorted, “Believe Me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain [i.e. Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth” (*John 4:21-23*).

In saying this, Christ was predicting that His followers would soon not need sacrifices, altars, temples, or priests—i.e. that religion as then understood would be rendered superfluous. Father Alexander Schmemmann understood this clearly, and he wrote, “Christianity is in a profound sense the end of *all religion* ... Religion is needed where there is a wall of separation between God and man. But Christ who is both God and man, has broken down the wall between man and God. He has inaugurated a new life, not a new religion. It was this freedom of the early church from ‘religion’ in the usual, traditional sense of this word, that led the pagans into accusing Christians of atheism. Christians had no concern for any sacred geography, no temples, no cult” (from his *For the Life of the World*).

Religion indeed requires cult—i.e. sacrifices, temples, priests. But Christianity needs none of these, because it has Jesus, and *He* is our Sacrifice, our Temple, our Priest. Christianity is therefore not a religion, but the presence of Jesus in our midst, bringing us new life.

Sadly, this truth is rarely seen, and Christianity is lumped together with other religions by the world—and even by Christians. This transposition of the presence of Christ in our midst into yet another religion—albeit the true religion, compared to other faiths—represents a tragic distortion and misunderstanding of Christ and His Church. It also leads to worldliness in Church people, for it makes the Church into an institution, with all the inevitable compromises that institutions in this age must make. These sad compromises are obvious to require much documentation.

A recognition that Christ has overturned all the fundamental realities of this age challenges us to live differently than the world lives. One thinks of Chesterton’s aphorism that Christian ethics have not been tried and found wanting, but found difficult and left untried. As those whose hearts belong to Christ, we must try them more often.