


ASKING 1 FOR CRUMBS



THE GOSPELS are full of stories that rightly put us a bit on edge. Not the least of these is the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15.

A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.” Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said. He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment (*Matthew 15:22-28*).

Jewish men in Jesus’ time were taught to pray, *Lord, I am grateful I was not born a Gentile, a woman—or a dog*. When this Gentile woman approached Jesus in front of a crowd of mostly Jewish men, you can imagine the embarrassment. Unflinching at her own disgrace, the woman cried out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”



The disciples wanted her sent away. The woman wanted action. Jesus disappointed them both. He merely answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” The woman seemed to be outside the scope of the mission for the Jewish Messiah. But she also seemed not to care too much about that. After all, she had a suffering daughter. Who, for the love of a child, wouldn’t go to the length of public humiliation for restoration? “Lord, help me!” she insisted.

We imagine Jesus’ words carried quite a sting when he said, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” Dogs? That must have hurt.

Yet the woman did not seem fazed by the rhetorical bite. “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”

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On its face, this is the kind of story that would have moved the original readers of Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew, after all, was writing specifically to a Jewish audience, making the case along Jewish lines that Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for. So Jewish readers would have understood how this woman wouldn’t have had a place in the banquet the Messiah would come to host. The Messiah was coming to redeem Israel, not the other nations.

But something incredible happens in Matthew 15. The mission of the Messiah begins to surprise us, because it begins to expand in front of our eyes. Jesus’ mission was so much bigger than any culture, ethnicity, or worldview. As He looked upon this woman, He didn’t see someone who was naturally excluded from the banquet He was going to throw, a person who wouldn’t have a place at the table. Instead, He saw her with the compassion of the Father and caught sight of “great faith” in a most unexpected soul. The wideness of the Kingdom Jesus had come to preach and practice drew this Gentile woman—the ultimate outsider—into the family of God.

It is also astounding to us that the Gentile woman did not see herself as deserving of anything. She understood the place of her rung on the social ladder. No true rebuttals were made, no passionate speech on the human rights theory of equality, no list of inner quali-

ties and characteristics—not even an emotional plea for her worth in God’s eyes. She acknowledged herself as a dog and merely asked for crumbs—the overflow of a meal to which she was not invited.

In response to this Gentile’s humble request, Jesus commended her faith as “great,” an honor given to only two people in all the gospel accounts—neither of whom were Jewish, but outsiders. Of course, you might still be put off at how our perfect, sinless Lord could call this desperate woman a dog. In the twenty-first century we cannot help but hear His words very differently than first-century Palestinians would have heard them, although that fact does little to settle the queasy feeling in our stomachs left by this passage.

Queasiness aside, the marvelous, salvific message in this passage is that Jesus affirmed her place in the kingdom of God. Her plight would no longer be outside the scope of God’s redemptive work in creation. As far as any of the Jews of the day were concerned, the party was not for her, yet Jesus pulled up an extra chair to the table, for the banquet was about to begin.

These days few Christians question whether their ancestral heritage opens a place for them in God’s promised salvation. We’ve read enough of Paul’s letters (sometimes we’ve read them poorly, but we’ve read them all the same) to believe that Christ has expanded the scope of God’s mission to the ends of the earth, every tongue, tribe, and nation. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” we read (Galatians 3:28). Still, there seems somehow to be more suspicion than ever regarding who is in and who is out of the promises of God.

In the 2008 United States presidential election, vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin famously spoke about “real” America, describing it as more rural, conservative, and concerned with family values than the urbanized upbringing of her “community organizer” opponent. Comedians at *Saturday Night Live* latched onto Sarah Palin’s description of “real” America. Tina Fey became a household name. The war of words was on as the right and left tried to coin more quick and



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catchy phrases to negatively describe each other. Sometimes it was just hilarious. Other times, it wasn't becoming of the way humans ought to speak about each other. Funny as it can sometimes be, our fear is that this same concept is being transplanted into our churches, the idea that there are *real* Christians, a category not defined by Christian creeds or biblical integrity but by particular culturally and philosophically defined worldviews. It may be that you've experienced this for yourself and that somewhere along the way others in the church have been a little suspicious of you.

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The suspicion is especially strong along what seems to be largely generational lines. We have seen too many dear friends walk away from their churches, organized religion, and sometimes walk away from Christ completely because they so heavily felt the eye of suspicion. You can label the battle any way you like—emergent vs. traditional, modern vs. postmodern, missional vs. evangelical—the battle lines are largely age-related. Not that there is a magical age at which you become one or the other, but there is a major sociological shift between people who reached adulthood in the 1990s and 2000s from prior generations, especially concerning views on organized religion.¹ In one national survey, for example, sixty-one percent of young adults in their twenties who had been involved in the church as teenagers no longer identify with a worshipping body.²

So what's the problem? It's that this sociological shift leaves a generation displaced and begging for crumbs. It's not purposeful—not always, but it is happening. If you can stick with the metaphor, the church is the table, and there are plenty who have lost a seat at the table because they're on the wrong side of this sociological shift. There's a disconnect, and it's painful, not only to those who find they no longer have a seat at the table but also to the entire church, whether we realize it yet or not.

It's not that all young Christians have left the church. Of those who have stayed, some are content and doing their best to faithfully

live out the gospel in their local congregations. If that's you, fantastic. We hope you find this book interesting and enlightening. But many others are struggling. Many are church-hopping or finding themselves sleeping in more Sunday mornings than not, even though they still identify with Christianity at some level. They're just looking for the right fit. Others are happy to find Christian connection through an assortment of religious services and traditions: attending their parents' church on Easter and Mother's Day, hooking up with a small group of young singles or couples affiliated with a nearby mega-church, and maybe hitting a random church with friends a few weekends a month. Others have found a church just recently, and they're even toying with the idea of committing to it, but it's pretty different from the faith tradition that raised them and introduced them to Jesus for the first time, and these people probably feel the loss of those roots, even while rejoicing in the sustenance their new church provides. Others are still attending the churches in which they grew up—or at least churches a lot like it—only to strain under the feelings of disconnection, confusion, frustration, suspicion, and maybe even placelessness.

We're assuming that if you're reading this book you've had some kind of experience and background with the church but that you may now be struggling to find a place within the church that taught you about faith in Jesus. You may feel as if your dreams and visions of what the church ought to be do not line up with the reality of your experience in the church, and that leaves you wondering if the church is the place for you. If that's you, we want you to know that as twenty-somethings we resonate with the angst and frustration that comes from wanting your church to be a little more like the kingdom of God you've been hearing about for so long. As people on the younger side of life, we, too, have had our share of questions, especially as we see a rift emerging between younger and older generations, and we wondered if the church is a place that really has space for our energy, passion, and faith.

But you may also be reading this book if you are a leader within the church who is discontent with the current trends affecting young people. If that's you, we want you to know how much we resonate with the heartbreak and frustration leaders experience who have



poured years of their lives into discipleship for children and youth only to see them walk away. As pastors, we often struggle with the emotions of failure that come from doing everything we know how to do only to see young people turn away from the grace and mercy we long for them to receive.

Finally, we hope this book will serve to resource those who want to know more about this generational dynamic and what it might mean for both young and old Christians. You may, like many others in the church, be trying to be faithfully Christian and can't seem to understand why people are so entrenched in particular theological camps and using such fiery rhetoric and charging one another with being less than faithful, based upon paradigms and practices usually associated with particular age groups. If that's you, we hope this book will help bring you up to speed and calm some of the more significant fears about the leadership of the church being passed down to the next generation.

SHOCK AND AFTERSHOCK


As Robert Putnam and David Campbell explain in *American Grace*, American religious life is experiencing the third seismic shock over the last half century.³ The first—you guessed it—was the long 1960s, an era in which the civil religious institutions so fortified in the 1950s came under real scrutiny. No longer did people fill pews because of duty or a sense of pride and establishment. Instead, the country questioned many of the moral issues long dictated by a Judeo-Christian worldview (such as sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll). But by the time the late 1970s and early 1980s rolled around, an aftershock rolled out from the free love epicenter as large numbers of people who were deeply concerned with the tidal wave of moral and religious abandonment of the 1960s found their way to pews, especially in Evangelical churches.

In this second shock to the American religious landscape, the diversity of social and political opinions that once described American Christianity began to recede as “highly religious” people became more and more associated with conservatism. But the strong unity and



social and political leverage the Christian right gained in the 1980s would ultimately become the setting of the stage for the third shock. Unfortunately, the third movement, as far as Campbell and Putnam can tell, involves a younger generation, those reaching adulthood in the 1990s and 2000s, the generation of the authors of this book, moving away from religious institutions.


The result of the third shock has been an increasing group called the *nones*, who claim no religious identity whatsoever. The *nones* tend to be college educated and raised in mildly religious households. Surprisingly, this increasing group isn't skeptical of faith. In fact, many consider themselves spiritual and religious; they even have a positive view of Jesus. But after experiencing the result of a somewhat oppressive Evangelical culture in the 1980s and 1990s, this younger generation has said, "If that's what religion is all about then it's not for me."⁴



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In what Putnam and Campbell have illustrated, major shifts have taken place over the last two generations in American religious life. The subtext, then, is that those shifts have significant impacts in the lives of all generations. Because the younger generations have tended to turn away from the faith structures of their parents' and grandparents' generations, they are seeking to experience their faith in ways that look or sound different from their parents. Putnam and Campbell do not present to us a stark denial of faith in the younger generation but an aftershock of a major sociological shift out of which differences in the expression of faith arise. Those differences of expression often lead to confusion and possibly even suspicion between the generations, an idea we will explore more fully later.

Not long after Putnam and Campbell published their sociological findings in *American Grace*, *Christianity Today* published an article examining trends of young people leaving the church.⁵ Drew Dyck, the author of the article, surveys several books that represent interviews with thousands of young adults and finds that most of the young people in North America had at some point in their lives been worshipers of Jesus. "Most unbelieving outsiders," he writes, "are old friends,



yesterday's worshipers, children who once prayed to Jesus." Dyck goes on to write that he, like us, found incredible diversity in the stories young people tell about trying to find their place in the church. But again there is a common theme, says Dyck, in that most young people will attribute their exit of the church to something that happened *in* the church. It isn't so much that they have fundamental problems with the beliefs of the church as much as they have encountered something unwelcoming that left them wondering if they had a place there any longer. "Many de-conversions were precipitated by what happened inside rather than outside the church," Dyck writes. "Even those who adopted materialist worldviews or vogueish spiritualities traced their departures back to what happened in church."

Part of what happens in the church to cause young people to question their place there is an emerging suspicion between the generations, Dyck points out. Perhaps this is the way it has always been. Perhaps older generations have always wondered why their children are so wieldy and impetuous. In what we've heard from young people, their placelessness is often associated with their church being confused by their kind of Christianity. They long to be faithful, they long to be disciples, and yet discipleship to Christ takes on different practices than their parents' generation, leaving some in the older generation confused and even a bit suspicious. That suspicion in turn leaves young people wondering if they still have a place in the church, if their practices of worship are a valid expression of their faith.

Young people have plenty of questions, too, and often they are asking questions that their parents did not have to wrestle with when they were young adults. This can lead to a sense of placelessness on the part of a young Christian struggling with either a different expression of Christian faith or the questions that accompany a growing and healthy faith.

"A generation of young Christians believes that the churches in which they were raised are not safe and hospitable places to express doubts," writes David Kinnaman.⁶ There are certainly times when the questions of a young generation are just as perplexing to the church as their expressions of faith, sometimes leading to suspicion. In the face of such questions, it is important for the church to continue to offer

hospitality to young people and to create space for them within the church to wrestle with doubt rather than cast their questions in terms that exclude them from the table.

As people who have come of age in the generations of the “nones,” we are troubled that this kind of confusion and suspicion causes our generation to miss out on the incredible gift of God’s redemptive salvation—but that the church, too, is missing out on the gift that is the presence of young people. We hear from those in our generation who are struggling to find a place in the church that they don’t fit, often because of some kind of disproportionate attention being paid in the church to who is “in” and who is “out” at the banquet table.

To be clear, we are not relativists. We do not believe that the Christian faith is whatever you would have it be or a smorgasbord from which you can build your own spiritual “happy meal.” And thanks be to God for this! If we are going to be redeemed, healed, and sanctified, it won’t be a redemption, healing, or sanctification of our own invention. We have each spent years of training in theological studies so that we can be discerning servants when it comes to doctrine. However, we are also uneasy with the kind of religious life that is overtly concerned with who should not be invited to the table, because it’s that kind of approach that young people tell us closes off their place at the banquet.

Jesus’ action in the story of the Gentile woman is a better example of the kind of balance we would like to strike than anything we could come up with. As we’ve seen, the Gentile woman was a person who was definitely an outsider, a person who wasn’t invited to the table. But as she came to Jesus with the faith that He could bring healing to her life and submitted herself to His instruction and mercy, she was welcomed by Jesus and given a place at the table.

The welcome of the Body of Christ is a wide welcome, a mercy-filled and gracious embrace, but it is predicated upon coming to Christ with the faith that His mercy will change our lives and make us different. The message of Christ’s salvation is that you can come as you are but that you leave as a changed person, and that’s great news. In other words, the church isn’t just a big group of people who happen to get together in the general spirit of friendliness and feel good



about who they are, but rather it is a particular and peculiar communion of those who have placed their faith in Christ, who have given themselves to His mission and mercy, who have been reconciled to one another by the Spirit. That's the kind of example in the world that can show how incredible God's grace is and reflect the glory for such an accomplishment to God.

And yet there are times when we church people bend a little bit to the temptation to set our own parameters, to write our own definitions, and to stand in the way of those who would come to Jesus in humility and submit to Him with the faith that He could transform their lives. We imperfect people, in other words, tend to be a little more anxious to define some as "insiders" and others as "outsiders" than Jesus does. As we've seen in Matthew 15, Jesus makes space for outsiders who come with "great faith," hoping for healing, wholeness, and redemption. A genuine welcome is preceded by a genuine faith.

We are finding that it is often young people who are seen as outsiders, as those who don't fit the mold of the faithful. Not that young people don't also fall to the temptation to define themselves as insiders and all others as outsiders, but when it comes to the church, they are a generation who wonders if their faith in Christ still qualifies them for a place at the table, especially when the outward expression of their faith looks so different from the outward expression of faith of their parents and grandparents. These expressions are those that sometimes confuse the church, and suspicion results. Could young people, like the Gentile woman, be offered a welcome by Jesus? Could they, based upon their faith in Christ's redemption, find that they, too, could be offered a place at the banquet?

We believe the answer is a hopeful and powerful *yes*. We think that God has given and continues to give the church what it needs to faithfully embody the kingdom of God, to welcome strangers and outsiders who come with great faith. It is with that hope that we offer this book to those who are wondering if they have a place any longer, those who wonder why their churches lack young people, those who remain present in their churches as a prophetic presence, and those whose particularity causes them to be viewed with suspicion.

Gladly we offer this in joyful hope, not that we can engineer a clever solution or begin to bang the church into an image that we think is fitting for an egalitarian, modern society, but that God continues to give the church what it needs to be the church. Sometimes those gifts are silent, strange, and surprising. May we have eyes to see, ears to hear, faith and humility enough to accept that God may be giving us what we need in the form of outsiders. Perhaps the gift of God can be seen in those who do not have a place at the table but whose ravenous hunger drives them to ask for nothing more than the crumbs that fall to the ground.



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BOLDLY ASKING FOR WELCOME

Consider the Gentile woman again. Even though the insiders of the day thought she didn't deserve an invitation to the party, she knew that there was only one table that could fill her hunger for wholeness. She would not be turned away. Boldly she asked for crumbs. She was content to sit at the feet of the guests like a dog and catch whatever might fall to the floor.

The image of a grown woman lapping the floor for crumbs is absurd. If you're revolted by the image, that's good: it's probably the point of using that particular image. But through her extended analogy she brought to light the reality of the hierarchy in which she was a victim, the reality of her placelessness. This is the kind of thing that we call "prophetic presence," an idea we'll unpack later in the book.

We doubt that she got up that morning intending to crusade for justice. After all, she had a little girl to care for. She just wanted wholeness and restoration, even if she had to be made the fool. But by the end of the story, Jesus lifted her up off the ground and gave her a seat at the table. The woman asked for crumbs and was welcomed as an honored guest in the kingdom of God.

The trouble is—we are rarely so bold. We think much of ourselves. We're not dogs. By the time we could understand full sen-



tences, marketers were telling us that we had the power of selection and deserved to select, and we had the purchasing power to do so. We're taught that the only things that bring us the greatest fulfillment are those things that create an identity that gives us our desired status among our peers. And the message that comes through: our opinions matter; our voices ought to be heard. It's true that our voices, opinions, and particularities ought to have a place in the Kingdom, but with a caveat: so long as they come under the submission to Christ's Lordship. Oh, but there's a word that doesn't settle well: *submission*. We'll talk more about this later.

There are many who have been deeply scarred by the suspicion, word wars, or simple coldness of the generational collision we're outlining. Others merely sense a cooling in their own hearts and lives toward the church, the faith, the Savior. Healing begins in receiving God's good gifts. But moving from our wounds toward participating in God's gift-giving is no small thing. Finding a place in communities that have hurt us requires the rebuilding of trust, and reading a book won't rebuild that trust. But perhaps these next several chapters will provide space and time for our readers to enter into deep reflection about their place in the church.