

Chapter Five

Part One: The Third Generation

The Tool

Irony of ironies. All is irony.
Ecclesiastes 1

Two plus two is four; but, it does not make me happy.
Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Often times when I speak to people about the long project of preaching through the synoptic gospels, how it took a decade, and how I hope to do it again before I retire, they always, inevitably will say, "Why not John?"

After many poorly framed answers, I have come upon a good one. "If I were to do so, the sermons would be at least two hours long and the project would, in itself, last a decade." The curious flinch pinch their face, and say, "Well then, no."

You can preach a sermon from a phrase in Mark; you can write a homily from a sentence drawn from an epistle of Paul. You can. Many have done it. Yet, each phrase, each sentence of John should be given such focus. It is not a matter of could, but should.

Our theory for reading the synoptic gospels is based on a generational shift. Scholars all date the letters of Paul to have been written in the first generation of the church; all scholars date the synoptic gospels as being composed in the second generation. There is near unanimity regarding John — the third generation.

Our theory for reading John will be consistent with our theory for the other gospels. The generation is key. Yet, as we stated with the letters of Paul, the difference of the generations and what they offered is a window for understanding, not a verdict for what is best or better. When Paul had become too cosmic, the synoptics brought Jesus back down to earth, this was good for both. It should not be seen as one or the other. When the synoptics became a new law, the Gospel of John sought to balance the balance, the need for order, with a powerful tool.

How does one balance the balance? With irony of course.

Irony is a very sticky wicket. Irony is almost always terribly confused with strange coincidence and opposition. That is to say it is confused with what it uses instead of being understood for what it tries to do.

Irony is also a kind of fever. Edward Goode wrote, irony is like fool's gold; once you see it, it is everywhere. John uses irony to balance the balance of the synoptics; yet he doesn't use it everywhere. The challenge in reading and understanding John is let the strange be unreconciled and to let irony be appreciated with patience and trust. Irony will always reveal the truth if you leave it alone.

There is great irony in the synoptic gospels and the letters of Paul. They use it; each employ ironic statements and claims that can only be understood ironically. Yet, Paul's letters are not the work of an ironist; the synoptics are not built upon an ironic foundation. Paradox? Yes. Irony? No. If you say, "You must lose your life to gain it," you have spoken paradoxically. If you tell a Pharisee, "Why do you call me good," as Jesus said to Nicodemus, you are venturing into irony.

Paradox is the way contradiction yields truth. An ironist uses paradox. When Jesus says, "You must be born again," he is speaking paradoxically. That he speaks this truth to a Pharisee, that the most profound truth of the gospels is revealed to one who was part of the death of Jesus, this is irony.

Another example will surely help or more thoroughly confuse.

Jesus is thirsty. He asks for some water from a Samaritan woman who is a prostitute. As they discuss his need for a drink of water, he reveals to her that he is the Messiah. That a Galilean peasant is the Messiah is a paradox. That the truth of his being the Messiah was revealed in the Gospel of John to a Samaritan prostitute over a drink of water, well, that is irony.

In the Gospel of Mark, this moment of great revelation is reserved for the high priest on the day before Jesus died. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tosses out this most profound confession so to secure a drink of water from a woman who is an outcast of the outcasts. This is why the sermons would be so long.

The sermons would be of interminable length because they demand this kind of distinction. You need history, culture, paradox, mystery, and order to navigate the teachings of Jesus. In the synoptics this is enough. Yet, in John after all is settled, irony upends the whole effort. He takes the stories of the synoptics and uses irony to create a whole different view.

The Samaritan Woman at the Well is a story unique to John. Yet, the confession Jesus makes to the woman has a place in the synoptics. The place is of great importance, a kind of climax. John takes this momentous moment makes it something altogether different. Does he make it different to lower its value? Does he make it different to challenge your assumptions about its value? This is what irony is meant to do.

Let's put the confession of Jesus in Mark next to the confession of Jesus in John. Before we consider this, though, remember, John is the next generation. He is recasting the moment for a purpose. In the Gospel Mark the confession looks like this:

They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" But even on this point their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, "**I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.**" Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All of them condemned him as deserving death.

This is how John told the same story:

Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said." When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" Jesus answered, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now, listen to the exchange at the well with the Samaritan Woman:

But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no

husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “**I am he, the one who is speaking to you.**”

One of the keys to understanding the Gospel of John and reading him with all the power his words possess is to see his effort as a reworking, a redoing of the synoptic tradition. Mostly, though, it is to recognize that Matthew, Mark, and Luke had become a tradition. John doesn't reject the tradition, he recasts them as a moment to find their power anew.

In the synoptics' story, Jesus doesn't confess who he is until the very end of his life. This confession is made to the high priest of the Jews. This is like saying you are not going to make your case until you present it before the Supreme Court. Big! John takes this big confession and he makes it something said along the way; he casts it along the way because “Jesus had to go through Samaria.” John puts Jesus in the cultural waste land of Palestine; he is with the “untouchables.” And then, he is with the outcast of the outcast: a Samaritan prostitute. This is the place where John places the climax of Mark's gospel.

To see this reworking you need to have a very clear understanding of what Matthew, Mark, and Luke are trying to do. And then, you need a very good understanding of how their work had become a tradition. Why this tradition was a problem is something we will explore in the next part of this chapter. For now, suffice it to say, John felt a great need to rework the stories of the synoptics. We will look at three of the most important examples.

Same Story, Different Purpose

Clearing the Temple

There is a lovely structure to the synoptics, or as Luke called it, an order. There is Galilee and, then, Judea; Capernaum and, then, Jerusalem. From this order emerge all the stories and the progression of the narrative. Each of the synoptics has a Judean baptismal scene and temptation; Matthew and Luke describe the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, but then they are quick to move the story to Galilee. Luke, as we just saw, changed this order a bit: he inserted a long narrative known as the Samaritan Pilgrimage. Yet, he didn't change the basic order of Mark. Matthew did the same with his Sermon on the Mount, again without changing the

order. The Sermon is a large insertion into the story, but the order of the story stays the same. And then came John.

John followed the order of the synoptics if you take out the geography. The order: baptism, ministry, passion, and resurrection is followed in John just as it is in the synoptics. Yet, how he described baptism, the events of Jesus' ministry, the shape of the passion, and, certainly, the resurrection are all qualitatively different. There are three ways that tradition has handled this. The first is to posit a different tradition, a stand-alone perspective. John described Jesus' life and death from a community and source set apart from the synoptics. A second theory is to say, John was interpreting the gospel to a different community; his effort is to convey the synoptics to a gnostic set of believers. A third one, the one we will explore, is that the gospel of John is a critical reworking of the synoptics. His gospel is a response to a challenge, just as the synoptics were a response to a challenge in Paul's letters.

In the second part of this chapter we will explore the theories surrounding the challenge. Here it is enough to simply encounter the differences. The first major shift in John from the synoptics comes in the second chapter. The clearing of the temple in the synoptics was the dramatic flourish to the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Although the synoptics record it happening on different days and times, all three connect it to the entry of Jesus on what we call Palm Sunday. The two events are bound together. John takes them apart.

The Gospel of John records a similar Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem as the synoptics, but there is no clearing of the temple because it already happened. After he was baptized and called a few disciples, according to John, Jesus clears the temple with a whip! According to the first two theories this is either a radically different memory being offered to a community set apart or it is a secret version of events, a kind of higher version.

Neither one of these theories are bad or unimaginable. For me, and for the larger understanding of the gospels, they do though lack any way of connecting John to the synoptics. Again, our theory here will be one of critique. John took an established, clearly established sequence, and set it aside. He didn't toss it out or reject the story. The clearing of the temple in John is pretty much the same story as in the synoptics. It is simply out of "order."

Consider John's version of the clearing of the temple:

After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days. The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise

it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

And now Mark:

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

And his disciples heard it.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?

But you have made it a den of robbers."

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

The similar pieces of each story is important. Each story describes a Passover visit to Jerusalem after a journey from Capernaum; each story has Jesus confront people buying and selling in the temple; each story concludes with a confrontation with the Pharisees.

Now what is dissimilar. In Mark this story is woven into the Palm Sunday events and the week of Jesus' death; John describes a Passover during the life of Jesus. For Mark the identity of Jesus and his passion predictions were all revealed to the disciples, but to no one

else; in John Jesus begins his ministry with a passion prediction and a promise of resurrection and he offers it to all who can hear.

There are many more similarities and aspects that are dissimilar between the two, yet, the most important for reading the Gospel of John in relationship to the synoptics is not in the story itself, but in the placement of the story in the larger gospel. For the synoptics this is a story of the end; for John this is a story of the beginning.

Why?

If John is a critique of the synoptics, a challenge to find balance, then one answer is that John wants to give fair warning to the reader and listener. By placing the story of the clearing of the temple at the beginning of his gospel it is as if he is saying, "This will be a different way of looking at things." The story serves as a kind shot over the bow, a warning that the assumptions you hold will be questioned.

What is being questioned?

Perhaps the best answer is not to guess at what it was in the second century, but to recognize what it questioned in the 19th and 20th century. In the 19th century there arose a doctrine of scripture that claimed the bible was inerrant and infallible. This is a matter of biblical authority, and absolute authority at that. The inconsistency of John with the synoptics in the telling of the clearing of the temple is a great challenge to the idea of perfection. At first glance someone remembers the story in the wrong place, or Jesus cleared the temple more than once, or the stories must be harmonized with some sort of fanciful interpretation that would allow them to be recording the same story. Whatever answer was offered, the answer would have been an attempt to maintain the perfection of the bible and clarity of its authority.

As we have stated many times, the first centuries of the church was a time of great debate, the emergence of "orthodoxy." When we reach Constantine and Eusibius, this authority and debate would reach a legal status.

One way of looking at John is to see a gospel written to keep at bay this persistent need to make unquestionable authority, to undo the desire to make one, and only one, interpretation as correct. Moreover, it could be that John was trying to ironically reestablish the power of humility in the gospels after their message was lost with the arrogance that often comes with tradition.

Hence, one way to read the clearing the temple is to read it as a questioning of authority. This is certainly a component of how the synoptics and John record the story. In the synoptics it was simply a matter of questioning the authority of the priestly control of the temple; in John it may very well have served a different purpose: to question the leaders of the church.

The Bread and the Wine

Before we get to the relevant passages regarding the Lord's Supper, passages that seek to offer a similar story with a different purpose, let's take a short trip to the 13th century, or the dawn of the century to be precise.

If ever there was a moment of bizarre paradox in history, the fourth crusade would be a contender for one of the greatest. Each crusade had the same official purpose: to open and maintain the pilgrim route to Jerusalem. Some crusades were more well organized than others; some crusades were the stuff of Hollywood filled with such characters as Richard the Lion Heart and Saladin. The fourth crusade stands a bit alone.

Lasting only five years (1199-1204), the fourth crusade's most intriguing moment is when the western army sacked the city of Constantinople en route to the Holy Land. Be it a matter of sheer greed or long-standing animosity, the crusaders pillaged what should have been their most important ally.

In the midst of the sacking and the pillaging an event occurred that is very difficult for modern folk to comprehend. When the crusaders sacked the city they often paused to offer mass in churches (yet another strange thought). Yet, in Constantinople the worship of Christ followed the Orthodox Rite as opposed to the Roman Rite of the crusaders. The truly bizarre moment is that the people of Constantinople, the priests and the bishops, chose death and destruction rather than to allow the Roman Rite to be said in the churches.

I'll let that sink in for a moment. You would rather destroy the church, die, and see many others die with you, than follow a slightly different order of worship so to consecrate the host in the Lord's Supper. The answer was a pervasive, "Yes, I would rather die." Another level of irony: when Muslim armies of the Ottoman Turks swept over Constantinople 250 years later, there was no such sacrifice. The churches simply became mosques.

The point of the story is this: the history of the church is filled with examples of how the table of the Lord and the supper provided have been moments of powerful and violent exclusion. Roman Catholics killed Huguenots over the table; the modern ecumenical moment of the 20th century fell apart over the table. Unfortunately, the persistent theme of the Lord's Supper is division and acrimony not peace and humility. From Paul's letters we find the matter of table fellowship was a divisive matter from the opening decades of the church. This teaching is the only time Paul directly offered the words of Jesus in any of his letters implying this was something requiring great precision and authority. Perhaps it has always been so.

When we turn to the gospel of John for his take on this matter of the life of Jesus, two things are very clear: he values the meal immensely and he changes the way in which the story is told even more.

How do we know he values it?

We can see his value of the story because he makes a very key demand: unless you gnaw on my flesh and drink my blood you have no life in you.

It is important to introduce here, before we compare the synoptic meal to the meal of John, that there is no bread and wine at the last supper of Jesus in John's version. John does describe a last meal, but what he describes is a foot washing and then a very long discourse offered by Jesus to the twelve. John's "meal" is not in Jerusalem, but Galilee; it is not on the night of his arrest, but the day after Jesus fed the five thousand. Again, John has changed the order of the story. Only, in this instance, it is much easier to reconcile the two versions because one does not necessarily exclude the other.

Perhaps it is best to simply look at the description of the meal Jesus offers to those who follow him.

Mark records:

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, "Surely, not I?" He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born."

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'

But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter said to him, "Even though all become deserters, I will not." Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." But he said vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of them said the same.

Here is the parallel passage from John, his description of the last supper before the “farewell discourse.”

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.” For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.” After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, ‘The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’”

It is easy to see that Mark and John are describing the same night, the same gathering, but it is a very different focus. For John it is a foot washing that Jesus offers, perhaps the greatest act of humility. Again, same event, same night, but Mark recorded a very specific meal, a gift of bread and wine that would define the Christian Church for millennia. How is it that John does not include the eucharist? Is the foot washing meant as a substitute? Both of these questions are answered if we look to John 6.

At Capernaum, just following the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus offers himself as the “bread of life.” He repeats this self-declaration many times in the story John records and each time it becomes more and more problematic for those who are hearing. Perhaps the most problematic is the more literal translation of “eating”. In the passage below, when Jesus says eat my flesh, he is more literally saying “gnaw on my flesh.” This may help when you see the response, “many left” as they were offended or “scandalized.”

Here is John's version of the bread and the cup:

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Then

some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. **Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will**

live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil." He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

It is difficult to compare the description of the bread and the cup in Mark with the description of John. There is the same sort of offering, a self-sacrifice. There is also the reference to Judas betraying him as there is also a reference to disciples fleeing because of offence. Yet after that it become quite difficult to say, Jesus is talking about the same meal.

Perhaps the most unique are the bolded parts. In Mark the meal is an offering for the covenant. In Matthew, Jesus will say it is for the "forgiveness of sins." In John, the meal is something much greater. The meal is the gift of eternal life. With the meal we are "abiding" with Jesus which carries an image of mystical or spiritual union. The meal is also a promise of resurrection. The synoptics will only go so far as to suggest that disciples should offer this meal in memory.

It's hard to say that the description of the meal in John 6 is the same story as Mark 14. But let's consider this from a different sense of sameness. In Mark Jesus is offering his life to the disciples: this is my body; this is my blood. John offers the same story after the feeding of the five thousand. Only now it comes with a whole other level of union. Where the disciples had a shared experience and it was the arrest and crucifixion that would cause them to be flee in offence, now it is the supper itself that causes the disciples to leave Jesus, a matter of disunion.

In the second half of the chapter we will explore how the meal may have become a moment of controversy and division. Here let it suffice to say that John has taken a story of Mark and recast it in a different place, and with a different purpose. The meal, in John, has become a controversy, a public debate, a moment of offence. A private moment has become public. And with this we are nearing the structure of irony. The meal most likely had become a matter of great confidence by the end of the second generation of the church. Perhaps the meal had become a moment of great specificity, something akin to the passion and commitment of the Orthodox when faced with the Roman Rite.

It would take a whole book in itself to unpack John 6. Each line has a demand for understanding as well as the potential for ironic contradiction. We are faced with this dual demand because John was a critical reimagining of the synoptics. Hence, you cannot simply read the story of John 6. You need to compare it to how he changed the story of Mark 14 and what he replaced it with in John 13. And then you need to see how each line moves back and forth between these two.

Such comparison is what makes preaching the Gospel of John quite a challenge. To be faithful to his text demands a very profound level of understanding and creativity. What he says seems so simple, "this is the bread that comes down from heaven." We can read this claim that Jesus repeats in John 6. But what does it really mean? How is it that bread comes down from heaven? Is it the rite; is it the believer's faith? Jesus doesn't speak of this in the context of a supper, the kind that Mark records. Is the bread of heaven the "Lord's Supper?"

Before you answer too quickly, remember John is looking to challenge the established tradition. He takes the story out of its proper place and asks you to consider it in a new way. But what is this new way?

Signs and Sayings

The Gospel of Mark was built on geography and offered an earthly Jesus to the cosmic version of Paul. Matthew built on this geography with the Sermon on the Mount, an infancy narrative, and the infusion of many parables. Luke did the same. He built on the geography of Mark by adding Samaria, an infancy narrative, and many parables. The synoptics are built on geography, a very grounded image of Jesus. Where Paul described a transcendent God who sits on a throne and will come again, the synoptics talked about Capernaum and Gennesaret.

And then came John.

John has geography too. But he also has a cosmic Jesus. It is as if he is balancing the balance achieved by the synoptics and Paul. The best way to see this is to understand upon which structure John built his ironic gospel. There are two parts to John. There are signs and there are sayings. This is the Galilee and Judea of John. These two parts form the structure upon which the story of Jesus is told.

There are seven signs:

Changing water to wine
Healing the official's son
Healing the paralytic
Feeding the 5000
Walking on the water
Man born blind from birth
Raising of Lazarus

Some of these stories are unique to John (wine, healing the paralytic, man born blind, raising of Lazarus, healing the official's son) and some are not (feeding the 5000, walking on the water). Some stories have parallels in the synoptics (healing the blind and the lame and the ill), and some have no parallel.

Each of the seven signs are meant to point us to a truth. That is what a sign does. A sign points us toward a truth or a way or a place. Yet, what the seven signs point to is not altogether clear. It could be that they are about the earth. They all deal with very earthy matters, primarily the physical limits of life. Yet, they also break those physical limits. The water becomes wine; the dead live; water is firm.

Each parable in the synoptics invite a common experience: to gain the humility so to abide in the Kingdom of God. The seven signs do not seem to offer such a common theme. Perhaps the most common theme of the seven is power. Jesus has power. Jesus uses his power for good. This is true but the common ground is lost when we look to what is accomplished. Three people are given a new life; a group of people get wine. Jesus walks on water; hungry people are fed. One person is raised from the dead, but Jesus seems to find no joy in it.

An argument could be made that the signs are proof that Jesus is the messiah. He is demonstrating he is the Son of God. Yet, as we will see next, this was more of the function of the miracles and the healings and exorcisms in the synoptics. As Jesus said to the Pharisees, "so that you know I have the power to forgive sins I say, pick up your pallet and walk." Jesus spoke with his actions almost more than he spoke in words. In John there was no such need given how much Jesus talked about himself and declared he was the messiah.

The seven saying upon which the Gospel of John are built are as follows:

I am the bread of life
I am the door
I am the good shepherd
I am the resurrection and the life
I am the way the truth and the life
I am the light of the world
I am the vine.

This list of sayings Jesus makes about himself in John in no way exhausts all the claims that Jesus makes about himself. There are too many to list here. What is unique in these seven is that they form a structural parallel to the seven signs. The parallel can be seen in how signs and metaphors are different. A sign points to something; a metaphor participates in what it symbolizes. Hence Jesus is not showing people where to find bread when he says, "I am the bread of life," he is describing how his life is bread for us.

Unlike the signs, though, the sayings are all unique to John. In the synoptics Jesus will use all of these images, but not in any way that can be easily compared. A good example is that in Matthew, Jesus tells the crowd you are light of the world; in John he says that he is the light of the world. These two statements require a great effort to understand how they are both true and how they are both consistent.

The sayings listed above are often referred to as the “I Am’ Sayings”. Like John 6, these seven would require a great deal of time to understand, unpack, and then begin to reconcile how it is that in the synoptics it is the demons who proclaim Jesus is the Holy One and commands them to silence, but in John Jesus tells everyone who is he all the time. It is not enough to grasp the claim of Jesus; it is also necessary to see the way these claims compliment and contradict the image of Jesus in the synoptic gospels.

A final word before we venture to the second part of the chapter and explore what it was that caused offence and division leading to John’s gospel. It could be that one can simply read and enjoy the Gospel of John. And, it could be the difference between John and the synoptics are merely a matter of unique traditions. Moreover, to preach on a passage from John does not require a full exploration of how John is challenging traditions as a voice of the third generation of the church. All this is true. Yet, to truly discover what makes his gospel so important for the church that it was included in the canon despite its contradictions and inconsistencies, to see this you must follow his irony, comparing him to the synoptics. Otherwise, I believe, you miss the whole value of what he was trying to accomplish, what “he was sent to do.”