

***The Interpretation of John 6 and the ‘eating’
of Jesus – Does it relate to our preaching and
teaching of the Lord’s Supper?***

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One of the most important, and most difficult, tasks facing a Christian is the interpretation of Scripture. Every time the believer ponders a passage of God's inspired word they are forced to ask Luther's question, "What does this mean?" This task is doubly important for ministers of the gospel, because they are not only trying to figure out what this Word means for them, but because they are responsible for proclaiming to their congregation or classroom, "Thus says the Lord."

Among a variety of principles that Scripture teaches us about itself to aid the interpreter in this task is the understanding that Scripture is clear. Professor David Kuske writes that "...the words of Scripture have a simple, plain meaning, which is able to make a child wise for salvation."¹ This is the testimony of Paul to Timothy: "From infancy you have know the holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). This is the testimony of the psalmist: "The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (Psalm 119:130; cf. also 119:97-105). Scripture speaks plainly and clearly about God's plan of salvation. This does not mean, however, that every single word is understood by every single person. The Word of God is objectively clear, that is, it communicates the plan of God's salvation with absolute clarity. There is no debate over who God is or how God saves us. There is no debate over the person and work of Jesus Christ as revealed from Genesis to Revelation.

But there is also an element of subjective clarity. Not every person understands every single portion of God's Word to the same degree. There are differences caused by maturity of faith, maturity of intellect, not to mention the difficulties caused by our hostile sinful natures, causing us to misinterpret and misapply the Scriptures (Romans 7:7-25a, 8:7, Galatians 5:16-17). So, while on the one hand we testify strongly that God's Word is clear, on the other hand, we must admit that there are portions of Scripture that require more thought, discussion, and perhaps are open to more than one understanding. There are portions of Scripture that man has been unable to crack with one-hundred percent surety so that we can say, "This is what God means or to what he refers." This is caused by a lack of understanding the Biblical languages, or by a lack of understanding of the history and the culture of the times. John 6 is a portion of Scripture that has been put by many into this category. There has been debate and discussion over the years about what exactly John 6 is referring to, debate and discussion which appears to be heating up in the Lutheran church nowadays.² Is Jesus talking about believing in him and using the

¹ David Kuske, *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995, p. 71.

² A listing of some articles or works written by Lutherans in the last 20 years that advocate a sacramental (or at least more sacramental) understanding of John 6 would include: Peter Berg, "Reflections on a Christological

metaphorical language of eating and drinking? Or, is Jesus also referring to and teaching us about the Lord's Supper, that special meal he instituted on the night he was betrayed? Is John 6 a discourse on faith, or a "dry run of His word over the sacramental bread?"³

In order to answer these questions we will turn to the words of Jesus in John 6. We will study this discourse on the Bread of Life and answer the question, "How does John 6 relate to our preaching and teaching of the Lord's Supper?" We will look at the discourse, focusing on the key verses. We will discuss how John 6 relates to the Lord's Supper. Finally, we will look the practical implications our interpretation of John 6 has on our hermeneutic and our preaching and teaching.

John 6 and the 'eating' and 'drinking' of Jesus

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.... I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.... I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever (John 6:35, 49-51, 53-58).

□ *Jesus uses some striking language*

Jesus says that he is bread from heaven. He says that people should eat him and drink him. He even elaborates by saying that people should eat his flesh and drink his blood. No matter what Jesus is referring to, he certainly wants to grab the attention of his hearers then and now.

Three things are made clear from this portion of Scripture. Jesus wants us to think of him as the true bread from heaven. "I am the bread of life" (v35). "...here is the bread that comes down from heaven" (v50). "I am the living bread that came down from heaven" (v51). That's clear. Jesus wants us to eat his body. "He who comes to me will never go hungry" (v35). "... here is the bread... which a man may eat and not die" (v50). "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever" (v51). "...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man" (v53). "For my flesh is real food" (v55). Jesus also wants us to drink His blood. "...he who believes in me will never go

Hermeneutic with a Glance Toward John 6," *The Motley Magpie*, Vol. III:3 (July 2005), ps. 2-5; Brian Hamer, "Res and Verba in Lutheran Exegesis," *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology*, vol. XIV:1 (Epiphany 2005), ps. 33-42; James Voelz, "The Discourse on the Bread of Life in John 6: Is it Eucharistic?" in *Concordia Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January 1989), ps. 29-37; and John R. Stephenson, *The Lord's Supper*, St. Louis, MO: The Luther Academy, 2003.

3 Stephenson, p. 40.

thirsty” (v35). “...unless you...drink his blood, you have no life in you” (v53). “Whoever... drinks my blood has eternal life” (v54). “...my blood is real drink” (v55). But what is Jesus talking about when he speaks of eating and drinking his flesh and his blood?

□ ***Jesus is talking about faith***

In verse 29, Jesus established to the crowd in the synagogue of Capernaum that the great work is *believing* in the one the Father had sent. In verses 35 Jesus says, “...he who *believes* in me will never go thirsty.” In verse 40 he says, “For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and *believes* in him shall have eternal life.” In verses 47-48 Jesus tells the crowd, “I tell you the truth, he who *believes* has everlasting life. I am the bread of life.” Luther proclaimed in his sermons on John 6, “...to come to Christ is the same as to believe in Christ. That is what it means to have the bread and eat it.”⁴ This is similar to what Augustine said in one of his sermons on John 6, “Therefore, the Lord, who was about to give the Holy Spirit, said that he himself was the bread which has come down from heaven, encouraging us to believe in him. For to believe in him is to eat the living bread. He who believes eats; he is nourished invisibly because he is reborn invisibly.”⁵

□ ***Jesus says this eating and drinking is absolutely necessary for salvation***

Jesus says that without eating his flesh and drinking his blood, a man cannot be saved (vv53-54). This is clear as well. But what is referred to, what is absolutely necessary for salvation? Is Jesus talking about believing in him, or is he referring to the eating and drinking we do in the Lord’s Supper? The answer, again, is faith. Without faith in Jesus Christ and His work on our behalf, it is impossible to have life. “For it is by grace you have been saved, *through faith...*” (Ephesians 2:8). “No one comes to the Father *except through me*” (John 14:6). “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but *by faith in Jesus Christ*. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be *justified by faith* in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:15-16). “The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles *by faith...*” (Galatians 3:8). “This righteousness from God *comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe*” (Romans 3:22). “Consequently, *faith comes* from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). Many other

⁴ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, chapters 6-8*, American Edition, volume 23, St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959, p. 42. Luther goes on: “...He is speaking of bread in the sense of coming to Christ, that is, believing in Christ. For to eat, to come to Christ, and to believe in Christ are all one and the same thing” (42). A little later he says, “Just believe in Him, and then you have eaten Him and come to Him” (43).

⁵ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, Translated by John W. Rettig, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 79, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988, p. 250.

passages could be mustered in support of this great Scriptural truth. We are saved by the grace of God alone, through faith alone. Without faith it is impossible for a man to have eternal life. But, "...he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35).

Can the same thing be said about the sacrament of the Lord's Supper? Is it absolutely necessary to eat the flesh of Christ and to drink his blood as it is distributed to us in his glorious gospel meal in order to be saved? The answer is no. If it were absolutely necessary to partake of the Lord's Supper for salvation, what of all those who lived and died before the institution of the meal? What of Abraham, the great hero of faith, whose faith "was credited to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6, cf. Romans 4)? What of infants and children who die before confirmation? What of the thief on the cross to whom Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43)?⁶ Thus, the Christian Church has always held that it is the despising of the sacraments, whether it be referring to Baptism or the Lord's Supper, and not simply the lack of the sacraments which condemns. R.C.H. Lenski writes in his commentary on John:

The eating of which Jesus speaks throughout (note for instance v. 53) is absolutely necessary for salvation. Yet all the saints of the old covenant were saved without the Lord's Supper, so was the malefactor on the cross, so are all babes and children in the new covenant. This fact alone is decisive. It has never been answered by those who maintain the contrary concerning John 6. The old principle holds true: only the *contemptus*, never the *defectus* of the Supper condemns.⁷

Jesus' words in John 3 do not contradict this, where he speaks similarly ("Unless...") and Baptism is in clear view. It is important to remember a key difference between the two discourses. In John 3, Jesus was speaking to a Pharisee, Nicodemus, about something already taking place. The Baptist was baptizing, a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). Jesus and his disciples were baptizing (John 3:22, 4:1-2). When Jesus says that it is necessary to be baptized, he is speaking to a member of the party that is despising the sacrament of Baptism, or seeing it as a good work.⁸ Francis Pieper writes, "We, too, would have to tell a

6 Cf. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, translated by Joel Fredrich, Paul Prange, Bill Tackmier, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999, volume IV, p. 129. Hoenecke writes, "But it is wrong *a priori* to take John 6 as referring to the Lord's Supper. Then it would teach that no one could be saved without partaking of the Lord's Supper. That consideration in itself was reason enough for the Lutheran church constantly to reject the interpretation of John 6 as referring to the Lord's Supper." Cf. Luther's words from 1520, "Otherwise, if in this passage Christ were enjoining a sacramental eating, when he says: 'Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you' [John 6:53], he would be condemning all infants, all the sick, and all those absent or in any way hindered from the sacramental eating, however strong their faith might be." Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, American Edition, volume 36, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959, p. 19-20.

7 R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, Hendrickson Publisher's, 1998, p. 502.

8 Cf. Matthew 2:7-12; cf. also Luke 7:29-30, "But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's

despiser of Christ's Baptism: 'Except a man be baptized, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.'"⁹ This does not parallel with John 6. There is no meal Jesus could be referring to that the people were already despising.¹⁰

□ ***Jesus says that this eating always brings salvation***

In verse 54, Jesus says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." The promise is general, "Whoever." This is not made exclusive by saying, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood in a worthy manner," as Paul says about the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32.¹¹ Jesus says that everyone who eats his flesh and drinks his blood will live forever. This can only be said in reference to faith. The words of Jesus already recorded in John, and words that Jesus speaks after this discourse make that perfectly clear. To Nicodemus Jesus said, "...whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16b). To the woman at the well, Jesus says, in language similar to the discourse in John 6, "*Everyone* who drinks this water [the well water] will be thirsty again, but *whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst*" (John 4:13-14). To the Pharisees and crowds, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, *whoever hears my word and believes* him who sent me has eternal life" (John 5:24). After the bread of life discourse, Jesus, in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles shouts to all who will listen, "*If anyone is thirsty*, let him come to me and drink. *Whoever believes in me*, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37-38). Chemnitz writes, "...the eating in John 6 ought to be an eating by all people in all places and at all time."¹²

□ ***Jesus is using this language to make a point based on contextual events***¹³

A principle of Biblical interpretation that we follow is that Scripture interprets Scripture.

purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John."

⁹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1953, volume III, p. 281.

¹⁰ I am indebted for this insight to Francis Pieper, who wrote in his dogmatics, "But the scope of this passage [John 3:5] is reproof of the Pharisees and scribes, who rejected God's counsel of salvation appointed for their day and despised the Baptism of John while the publicans repented and were baptized" (III:281). Cf. also Lenski, p. 239.

¹¹ Cf. Martin Chemnitz, who writes in *The Lord's Supper*, "Therefore there is not only the spiritual eating of the body of Christ in the Supper, for many by eating that which Christ affirms is His body eat judgment to themselves, according to Paul, something which does not happen by spiritual eating" (58). And later, "For the eating of John 6 is always and by all people done unto salvation. But in the Supper many people eat judgment to themselves and in the eating become guilty of the body of Christ" (238). Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord's Supper*, translated by J.A.O. Preus, St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1979.

¹² Chemnitz, p. 238.

¹³ It would also be important to point out that this isn't the only place in Scripture where God uses the language of eating to talk about belief and faith, cf. Matthew 5:6, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Read again those words from John 4 and John 7. Look in the Old Testament, Isaiah 55 uses the pictures of food and drink (including wine) to discuss God's grace and His gifts to His people, including faith and belief.

When people ask, “Why does Jesus talk about eating and drinking his flesh and blood if he’s not referring to and teaching about the Lord’s Supper?” we can answer, “Look at the context.”¹⁴

Chapter six begins with the story of the feeding of the 5,000. Here, Jesus provides bread for the crowds, he feeds their stomachs. The result? The crowds want to make him a king. They want him to give them bread for their stomachs and to dislodge the hated Romans from rule in Judea. This is clear from the verses of John 6 which follow. And normally, in our preaching and teaching we only chastise the unbelieving hordes following Jesus from place to place asking for food. But Mark, in his gospel, records that even the disciples were a part of this misunderstanding. After Jesus stills the storm (which follows the feeding), “...he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they did not understand about the loaves; their hearts were hardened” (Mark 6:51-52). Jesus had some instructing to do about the true bread which he came into the world to give.

This confusion and misunderstanding continues during the discourse. The Jews in the synagogue “began to grumble” when he called himself the bread of life (6:41). When Jesus said “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world,” (v51), the crowds “began to argue sharply among themselves, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’” (v52)?

The hardness of the people’s hearts, leading them to continually misunderstand Jesus’ clear words about faith and belief in him, the bread who satisfies all hungers, the water and wine who satisfies all thirsts, led him to continually repeat, emphasize, and intensify his language about eating and drinking him, his flesh, his blood. This hardness eventually drove many of them, even “disciples” to call Jesus’ words too hard and to leave (John 6:60, 66). Luther preaches to his congregation and to us about Jesus’ choice of words:

There was a cogent reason for His choice of this word [that is, “eat”], for He saw before Him these uncouth and coarse people who were interested solely in eating and drinking. In addressing them He employs these words ‘eat’ and ‘drink’ because He wants His hearers to ponder them, even though they do not understand them at present, and then to ask Him further about their meaning. They were to investigate what He was driving at with this peculiar speech. What could He mean? Is one man to devour the other? Surely this cannot be the meaning. Then let them deliberate and reflect on this matter, and ask what He did mean.

...He puts the subject before them in puzzling words. Without such crude and strange expressions it would be impossible to tear the thoughts of these coarse sows and bellies away from the idea of gluttony and carousing.¹⁵

¹⁴ “Since the Bible is a perfect unity, every part of the Bible must be interpreted in the light of the context, both the immediate and the wider context” (Kuske, p. 124).

¹⁵ Luther, *Sermons*, p. 43.

Christ adopts a peculiar mode and a figurative speech here. To ‘eat’ here refers to spiritual eating and consuming. It was the miracle of feeding a vast throng with five barley loaves that gave rise to this discourse and argument of Christ, which runs through the entire chapter.¹⁶

[Jesus uses this language to] make it as clear as anyone could, so that they should not even imagine a reference to any object other than that which they see before their very eyes. He is speaking of Himself. He does this because they do not desist from their spiritual flitting about. They suppose that perhaps He is a different person from the one they see, or that He is the bread and eternal life in some other manner than by means of His flesh and blood, which they touch and see.¹⁷

The interpreter who lets the context of Scripture speak for itself, who follows the “old hermeneutical rule of Hilary,” of which Lenski speaks, that is, that “the true reader of the Scriptures is he who expects the passages of Holy Writ themselves to furnish their meaning, who carries nothing into them, who takes out only what they bring, and is careful not to make the Scriptures say what he thinks they ought to say,”¹⁸ that interpreter will be led to realize that in this portion of Scripture, Jesus is first and foremost teaching us about faith. Jesus leads this crowd through a classic Johannine spiral of repetition, restatement, and emphasis, to see that the only source of true satisfaction is bread from heaven, “food that endures to eternal life,” not “food that spoils” (John 6:27). Again, from Luther’s sermons:

It is obvious, therefore, that in this chapter the Lord is speaking of spiritual eating. For He Himself interprets this as a thirst and a hunger of the soul. The soul longs to live forever; it does not want to stand condemned; it desires to have a gracious God and to stand muster before the judgment seat of a wrathful God; it does not want to be accused by sin and the Law or go to hell – those are the soul’s longings, and these reflect a spiritual hunger and thirst. To satisfy these requires a spiritual food and drink, offered us when the Holy Spirit approaches and says: ‘If you do not want to die and be condemned, come to Christ, believe in Him, cling to Him, eat this spiritual food.’¹⁹

John 6 and its relation to the Lord’s Supper

Having examined the words of Jesus in John 6 and the context of Scripture, it is easy to see that John 6 is referring to faith. Jesus is not speaking cryptically about his Meal which he will institute at some future time.²⁰ To say so, would be to say more than Jesus says, for he at no

16 Luther, *Sermons*, p. 116.

17 Luther, *Sermons*, p. 118.

18 Lenski, p. 504. Cf. Kuske, who in his volume on biblical interpretation, notes that we don’t have the right to decide what words mean on our own, or to make them say something “that we subjectively decide we want to hear, or what we in our imagination” want something to say (Kuske, p. 69).

19 Luther, *Sermons*, p. 43.

20 Cf. the works cited in footnote 3, as well as Joachim Jeremias, Hermann Sasse, MacGregor, and Hook, for arguments of this nature. Most of these exegetes maintain that John 6 is a cryptic word about the Sacrament, because John is writing at a time of persecution, and is also writing so that only believers can understand him. In

place indicates that He is speaking in a cryptic manner. This would also go against our principles of scriptural interpretation, which let Scripture interpret Scripture, and let words say what they mean. In this case, we have words that are clearly figurative. In verse 35, Jesus tells us that eating equals believing. To add a second layer of meaning to these words would go against the clarity of Scripture. Kuske writes, “Since figurative language is illustrative, it is used to reveal things to people. It is not used to confuse or to conceal – as some contend Jesus did.”²¹

What is the relationship of John 6 to the Lord’s Supper? For even Chemnitz, who stoutly defended the proposition that John 6 is not sacramental, wrote, “There is no doubt that there is some relationship and connection between the words of institution and John 6.”²²

We first must state that in John 6 Jesus is speaking primarily about the spiritual eating of his flesh, that is, about faith and belief. The words of Scripture that we have cited establish this. We confess with the Formula of Concord:

First, there is a spiritual kind of eating, which Christ treats above all in John 6 [35-58]. This occurs in no other way than with the Spirit and faith in the proclamation of and meditation on the gospel, as well as in the Supper. It is in and of itself useful, salutary, and necessary for all Christians at all times for their salvation. Without this spiritual reception even the sacramental or oral eating in the Supper is not only not salutary but also harmful and damning.

This spiritual eating, however, is nothing other than faith – namely, hearkening to, accepting with faith, and applying to ourselves God’s Word, which presents Christ to us as true God and a true human being along with all his benefits (God’s grace, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life). These he won for us with his flesh, which he gave into death for us, and with his blood, which he poured out for us. Moreover, this faith means relying firmly upon this comfort (that we have a gracious God and eternal salvation for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ) with unshakable assurance and trust, holding on to this assurance in every difficulty and tribulation. (FC SD VII, K-W 604:61-62)

But, as paragraph 61 states, this spiritual eating also happens in the oral and sacramental eating of the Supper. Later, in paragraph 66, we confess:

some cases these arguments are defenses of allegorical interpretations. In other cases, (esp. Jeremias and the other non-Lutherans, like MacGregor and Hook) they are the results of historical-critical inquiry, which puts more emphasis on how *John* (or whoever the Evangelist is) constructed the text rather than how *Jesus* spoke and constructed His discourses.

Some also contend that using the argument that Jesus hadn’t instituted the meal, therefore John 6 can’t be Eucharistic, could be used to disprove Old Testament prophecy (cf. Berg). That is a warning worth listening too. Many solid principles of biblical interpretation can be mishandled by those that wish to confuse and pervert Scripture. In this case, however, it is really an apples and oranges argument. Prophecy uses figurative language to tell of future events. Jesus is using figurative language to make a point right now. Luther put these words onto the lips of Jesus, “Yes, with all my heart I will give it for that is why I came from heaven. Accept only Me. Let Me be your food. Do not pin your hope on another food. Beware of that. For I am the bread, not the pope or any other man on earth. No one except Me will help you. And if you cling to Me, no pope, no emperor, or devil will do you any harm; for here is the bread which will not let you go hungry” (Luther, *Sermons*, p. 44).

²¹ Kuske, p. 88.

²² Chemnitz, p. 237.

...all the ancient Christian teachers teach expressly, with one accord, and with the entire holy Christian church, that the body of Christ is not only received spiritually through faith, which takes place also apart from the sacrament, but also orally, and this not only by believing, godly Christians, but also by the unworthy, unbelieving, false, and evil Christians. (FC SD VII, K-W 604-605:66)

There, then, is the connection between John 6 and the sacrament. Jesus does urge us to eat of him spiritually, by faith. And since we learn that we can partake of the Lord's Supper to our condemnation from Paul (1 Corinthians 11:27-32), it can be said without a doubt that Jesus desires that we eat him spiritually in the Lord's Supper. As the one partakes orally, when that person partakes in faith, they are also eating Christ spiritually, which eating he taught about in John 6. Those who partake orally, but without faith, eat Christ's body orally, but not spiritually, and thus do not receive the benefits of that eating²³, which benefits Jesus described in John 6: an end to hunger, an end to thirst, forgiveness of sins, the indwelling of Christ, resurrection at the last day, eternal life. This is what Jesus desires, this is what Jesus urges in John 6. Again, from the sermons of Luther, as he paraphrases Jesus' words:

'When I declare that you must eat and drink Me in order to become one with Me, one flesh and blood, it is My will that you believe in Me. This is the sum and substance and the explanation of what I said about eating: I refer to spiritual food, which consists of faith in Me. You must have food different from which your fathers had in the wilderness, not earth-grown wine and bread, but a spiritual food, which I will dispense. And let him who desires this food and drink believe.'²⁴

John 6 and issues for preaching and teaching

The debate regarding John 6 is becoming more and more prominent. Recent articles in periodicals like *The Motley Magpie* and *Logia* by Pastors Peter Berg and Brian Hamer (cf. the bibliography) have stressed the importance of interpreting John 6 in a sacramental way. In fact, the authors declare that we must reexamine our hermeneutical principles if we are not willing to see John 6 as direct reference and teaching about the Lord's Supper. Hermann Sasse also saw the vital need for reading John 6 eucharistically (again, cf. the articles and writings in the bibliography).

This debate then, highlights some key hermeneutical issues for our times. How do we interpret Scripture? First, we must understand that Scripture is made up of the material (the words, syntax, and grammar) and the form (the content of the message). Both are equally

²³ This is the definition of an "unworthy communicant" according to both Scripture (1 Corinthians 11:27-32) and the Confessions. Cf. the Formula of Concord, "We believe teach and confess that there is only one kind of unworthy guest, those who do not believe" (FC EP, VII, K-W 506:18).

²⁴ Luther, *Sermons*, p. 45.

inspired. We study the Greek and Hebrew texts, the words, the syntax, the grammar, and we ask, “What is God saying to me?” We also understand that God has inspired the Scripture with divine content, and that content is Jesus Christ (John 5:39). We confess with Luther that all theology is Christology. We search the Scriptures diligently to find Christ, just as the Old Testament prophets did (1 Peter 1:10-12). In this search, though, how do we balance the material and the form, or as Hamer labels them, the *verba* and the *res*? Does one receive precedent over against another? Hamer would argue yes, the *res* precedes the *verba*. Thus, since the *res* of Scripture is Christ, we find Him in everything and everywhere. As Berg put it:

The obvious is that the Bible is about Jesus – all of the Bible is about Jesus....It’s not just that the Messianic psalms are about Christ, the whole Psalter is about Christ. He is the Old Testament and everything written therein is about him. Yes, he is obviously the Passover Lamb. The New Testament corroborates this. And yet, the Old Testament believers did not need the New Testament to tell them this. The hermeneutical key was the proto-evangelium (Genesis 3:15). Here was the warrant to search for and find Christ everywhere in the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets.²⁵

And this is true. We find Christ throughout the Scriptures. But the danger is letting the *res* run rampant without letting the *verba* check our use of the *res*. This leads to allegory, letting the interpreter find symbols and types of Christ, the sacraments, and the Church anywhere and in everything he or she wants.²⁶ This is a violation of the hermeneutical principles discussed above: letting Scripture interpret Scripture and letting words mean what they say, that is, speaking in their one, simple sense. Hamer contends that too often American Lutherans have let the *verba* dominate their exegesis, thus not allowing John 6 to be sacramental, robbing us of great Scriptural treasures for our faith, our preaching, and our catechesis. He says something with which most ministers of the gospel would sympathize. As the pastor sits in his study, pondering the Greek or Hebrew, and searching the Scriptures, as the teacher prepares the lesson for his or her classroom, they all seek to find Christ and God’s gospel in the text. The *res* of Scripture is always foremost in our minds. However, when the *res* runs wild over the *verba*, so that the text is approached with presuppositions, rather than letting the text itself show us what it is teaching, then the interpreter has fallen into allegory and into the dangers of spiritualizing Scripture, and misleading the people. No longer is the text saying what God wants it to say, but it is saying

²⁵ Berg, p. 3.

²⁶ Some of the standard symbols and types referred to are saying that the Good Samaritan is Christ, the Prodigal Son is Christ, the outstretched arms of Samson as “an intended image of the crucified Christ who stretched out his arms for the salvation of sinners.” Berg, p. 3. There is a fine line between applying words to Christ and saying that a text leads us to think of Christ, the Church, the Sacraments, and saying, “The text says....” Allegory is the crossing of that line, and when Scripture does not tell us something is a symbol or a type or an allegory, it is dangerous to make it so, because then it is our subjective opinion of Scripture at work, which can cast doubt on the objective clarity of the Word.

what I want it to say. It is reading the mind of God, something which we assuredly cannot do.²⁷ If the words don't say what they mean, how can anyone be sure that they understand even the simplest, clearest words? How can one be sure they understand the simple, clear words of institution with which Christ instituted the sacrament and explained to us what it is (his body and his blood in, with, and under the bread and wine) and what it does (offers, gives, seals, and delivers the forgiveness of sins)?

How then does the minister of the gospel preach and teach John 6? Obviously, it is a great text to preach and teach about faith and believing in God. It shares with us the object of our faith (Jesus Christ, the bread of life). It shares with us the blessings of that faith (an end to hunger and thirst, forgiveness of sins, the indwelling of Christ in the believer, resurrection from the dead, eternal life). It shares with us the necessity of that faith ("Unless you eat and drink...").

What about in connection with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper? In the catechism instruction tools being used in the Wisconsin Synod (the blue, "Kuske Catechism," and the newest Christ-Light materials), only John 6:63 is used in reference to the sacrament ("The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."). The use of the passage is to indicate that Jesus' words (in general, and thus including the words of institution) are spiritual and powerful, they give what they promise.

As noted in the Formula of Concord, this spiritual eating occurs "as well in the Supper" (FC SD VII, K-W, 604:61). Therefore it is not illegitimate, when preaching or teaching the Lord's Supper to make reference to John 6, saying that this is part of the eating Jesus teaches about. Nor is it wrong to work from the other direction, and after describing the faith and belief in Jesus that is true eating and drinking, to apply the words of John 6 to the Lord's Supper. Gerhard writes:

Christ's flesh at all times is and remains in and of itself a life-giving flesh; but, if we are to dip life from the well of life, then it is not enough that we eat sacramentally, by means of the consecrated bread, eat Christ's body; rather, to this must be added the spiritual consumption which occurs through faith and of which Christ speaks in John 6.²⁸

Confer also the words of James Fandrey:

²⁷ Kuske writes: "Those who allegorize will argue that there has to be more to the words, at least in some passages, than their simple, plain meaning. However, when the sense of the words in their common usage does not yield as lofty or as edifying a message as some people would like, they do not have the right to toy with the words and give them a different meaning. That is not letting God's Word communicate to us what he wants to say. Instead, it is people deciding for themselves what they want to hear" (71).

²⁸ John Gerhard, *A Comprehensive Explanation and Examination of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper (1610)*, (translated by Rev. Elmer Hohle, Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2000), p. 454.

...to say that Lutherans historically have seen absolutely no connection between John 6 and the sacrament would be to say too much, but it would be accurate to say that any statements made about the sacrament with reference to John 6 must be based on the clear passages of Scripture which speak of the sacrament, namely the words of institution from the synoptic gospels and from Paul in 1 Corinthians. For the Lutherans, John 6 is about spiritual eating by faith. Therefore, John 6 is related to the Sacrament of the Altar only insofar as the Sacrament of the Altar is related to faith. In this relationship, John 6 must always be informed by and measured against the words of institution, not vice versa.²⁹

The interpretation of Scripture is the most important task of the Christian's life. It is only in Scripture that the message of God's grace and love, the person and work of Jesus Christ, is revealed to us. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:41). And the way that God draws people to him is through the Holy Spirit using the gospel (the Word, preached, read, heard, taught, pondered; the waters of Baptism; the meal of Holy Communion) to create and strengthen faith. Thus, the correct and proper interpretation of Scripture is vital. For Scripture incorrectly interpreted, proclaimed, and applied, can alienate people from Christ (Galatians 5:4). We let Scripture speak. We let the Words say what they mean and we hear Christ proclaim:

*Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life which the Son of Man will give you....The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent....For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world....I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty....For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day....I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. **This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.** (John 6:27, 29, 33, 35, 38-39, 47-51)*

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²⁹ James Fandrey, "A Lutheran history of John 6 and the sacrament," thesis submitted for Master of Theology at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary WLS Essay File #1583, 2000, p. 77.

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All Scripture references are from the Concordia Self-Study Bible, the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.