

Is the Bread of Life the Body of Christ?

An isogogical/exegetical study of John 6:22-66 compared with the Words of Institution.

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Jesus began and ended his third year of earthly ministry with special meals. The first meal was the “feeding of the five thousand”. The second was the Lord’s Supper. Shortly after the second meal, Jesus was crucified and died -- an act which paid for the sins of all mankind. A single marketplace word (*tetelestai*, John 19:30) declared that fact for all time. What do the two meals have in common? Does the first meal point to the second? Some theologians think so. The Roman Catholic theologian Jean Gribet insists, “it is clear that the evangelist is explicitly referring here (John 6) to participation in the eucharist”¹.

An isogogical survey of John chapter 6 with a brief exegetical study of a few verses compared with the words of institution will reveal the relationship between the Bread of Life and the Body of Christ.

The Words of Institution

All three Synoptic Gospels record the words of institution. Paul, too, records these words. It is perhaps notable that John does not. Writing decades after the others, John adds in his Gospel what the others left out. John records some events by drawing them in a new light²; others he neglects to mention at all³. What the Apostle Matthew and the other evangelists wrote concerning this important event is sufficient -- John’s silence in the matter is a testimony to this fact.

The variations in the four accounts of the Lord’s Supper do not present any real difficulty. Matthew records Jesus’ words this way:

labete fagete, touto estin to swma mou. kai abwra
pothrion kai ucharisthsaj edwken autoij legwn:
piete e autoi pahtej, touto gar estin to aiwma mou
thj diaqhkhj to peri polwn eknunomenon eij alfesin

amartiwn.

*“Take! Eat! This is my body.” And taking the cup, after he has also given thanks he gave it to them saying, “Drink from it, all (of you). This is my blood of the covenant, which for the many is poured out for the forgiveness of sins.”*⁴

(Matthew 26:26b-28)

Mark’s account is virtually identical, in a slightly shortened form:

labete, touto estin to swma mou. kai\ abwn potherion eu\aristhsav edwken au\oi\, kai\ e\pion e\ au\ou\ paratev. kai\ eipen au\oi\ tou\to estin to ai\ma mou thv diaqhkhv to\ ek\unnonenon u\pek pol\ I\wn.

“Take! This is my body.” And taking the cup, after he gave thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out on behalf of many.”

(Mark 14:22b–24)

Mark uses *poured out on behalf of many* (u\pek pol\ I\wn) rather than the phrase *poured out for many* (peri\ pol\ I\wn), but we should remember that both men are almost certainly translating Aramaic into Greek (Matthew from memory, Mark from the memory of someone else such as Peter). These differences do not mean the men are following different ‘traditions,’ but rather are simply writing, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, exactly what happened, and showing that they are not merely dictating but rather using their own personal style of grammar and vocabulary to present the same true and inspired message.

Luke’s words, while equally conveying essentially the same message, add the subjective reassurance “for you” (u\pek u\wn).

kai\ abwn arton eu\aristhsav ekl\ asen kai\ edwken au\oi\ legwn: touto estin to swma mou to u\pek u\wn didomenon: tou\to poieite ei\ th\ e\nh\ amnhsin. kai\ to\ potherion w\ autwv meta\ to\ deiphsai, legwn: tou\to to\ potherion h\ (kainh\ diaqhkh\ e\ tw\ ai\ati\ mou to\ u\pek u\wn ek\unnonenon.

And taking the bread, after he gave thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying “This is my body, given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” And in the same way (he took) the cup after the supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

(Luke 22:19-20)

Luke also calls this covenant “new” (ἡ καινή). Since Luke chooses this word, he may be using it in more of the classical sense, “new” in quality⁵, although the newness in time idea is also clearly present. The other addition of Luke’s, “do this in remembrance of me,” is not vital to our understanding of the passage, since the primary purpose of this meal is for the benefit of believers. What we do in the supper is receive, not give. True, we remember what Jesus did for us on earth and especially on Calvary, but our memorial is secondary in importance to the historical event itself. Of course we do it in remembrance! As Christians, we could do nothing else.

Paul’s account in 1 Corinthians also includes Luke’s ἡ καινή/‘new’ and adds a postscript:

ο κύριος ἰησοῦς ἐπὶ τῆς νυκτὸς ἧ παρεδίδοτο ἐλάβεν αὐτὸν καὶ
εὐχαρίστησεν ἐκείνην καὶ ἔειπεν· τούτο μου ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπέκ
υψιῶν· τούτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν αἰῶνι. ὡς αὐτὸν καὶ τὸ
ποτήριον μετὰ τοῦ δείπνου λέγων· τούτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινή
διαθήκη ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ αἵματι· τούτο ποιεῖτε, ὅσκις ἐπιπιήτε,
εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν αἰῶνι. ὅσκις γὰρ ἐπισηήτε τὸν αὐτὸν τούτον
καὶ τὸ ποτήριον πιήτε, τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε ἄχρι
οὐραίων·

The Lord Jesus, during the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and after he gave thanks he broke it and said, "This is my body for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming the death of the Lord until he comes.

(1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

When Jesus says “Do this, whenever you drink it...” we should point out that there is a translation question. The present imperative τούτο ποιεῖτε could equally be taken as a present indicative: “You are doing this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” However, in connection with the other imperatives in the section and in the context of the institution of the Supper as a whole, the imperative works more smoothly and makes grammatical sense.

A textual variant in verse 24 inserts *kl wmenon* (present passive participle of *kl a/w*) after *to'uper*. The verse would then read: “This is my body being broken for you” (one can almost hear the *snap* of the *motza*). However, the most ancient witnesses to this reading are the hands of correctors:)², C³, and D²; also notice 1739^c and it^{f2}. The attestation to the shorter reading is simply better.

A third variant reading *qruphtomenon* “being broken in pieces,” has almost no attestation whatever. The fourth variant *didomenon* “being given” simply reflects Luke 22:19 above. It is likely that Luke learned the account from Paul’s preaching (cf. Acts 16:11-17, etc.).

Paul’s ‘postscript’ (verse 26) is important. He tells us that we are proclaiming (confessing, preaching) Christ’s *death*. This is something foreign to the words of Jesus in John 6, to which we now turn.

A Survey of John 6

Jesus began his third year of public ministry with a meal: the feeding of more than five thousand people. This is significant since he would also end the year with another meal -- the Lord’s Supper. Apart from the Resurrection, this is the only miracle which is recorded in each of the four gospels. Why would John include it, since one of his goals seems to be to record what the synoptists did not? It must be what follows, and how this miracle relates to that which follows. Although each synoptist relates details which the others do not about this miracle⁶, John’s additions are obviously the point of his account: the Jewish Passover Feast was near (6:4), Jesus tested his disciples (6:6a), he “already had in mind what he was going to do” (6:6b)⁷, and after the meal, the people tried to “make him king by force” (6:15). All of these have an impact on what would happen later. John sets the events he records in line according to the festivals, so he mentions that the Passover was near.⁸ Jesus would test his disciples at later times as well.

John follows this as Matthew and Mark do, with Jesus walking out to meet his disciples on the Sea of Galilee. John's climax to the account is the same as the others: Jesus answers his disciples' fear with $\epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\iota\mu\iota, \mu\eta\ \psi\omicron\beta\epsilon\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon$ "I Am; do not be afraid." But where the synoptists follow this with historical incidents that bring out their individual themes⁹, John relates something important which immediately followed. The people had misunderstood what Jesus is, trying to make him into a sort of 'bread king' (John 6:15), but Jesus seized the moment in order to teach his followers¹⁰ something about faith.

The phrase upon which all of John 6 turns is 6:29: "Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.'" Faith ("to believe") itself is not what saves, but rather the object of that faith ("to believe *in the one he had sent*"). Just to be certain everyone gets that point, Jesus repeats and rephrases it several times. These 'several times' are what we need to focus on most, since they culminate with the phrase in question in this paper: the bread of life.

After the people ask him for a miraculous sign like the one Moses gave (bread, 6:30,31), Jesus points out to them that Moses didn't give the bread from heaven at all; God did. He also says that the true bread from God, also a gift, gives life to the world.

Could this, we might ask, be the Lord's body and blood in the Supper? Taken alone, out of context, John 6:32, 33 would seem to leave room for this. But we cannot remove verses of the Bible from their context.

Urged to give the people this 'wonder bread', Jesus tells them flatly, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry." Could this, too, be a reference to Lord's Supper? Possibly — but notice the parallel statement with which Jesus explains these words: "He who believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus makes it clear that he is talking about faith in him, not physical consumption of his flesh and blood. Jesus rebukes his listeners (6:36): "You have seen me and still you do not believe." Is it still a little unclear? Could it possibly be? Just in case, Jesus adds (6:40): "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life."

The people still had trouble with this. They question the boldness of his words (6:41) and his background (6:42). Yet he patiently continues with his explanation (6:45) “Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.” Again and again, Jesus insists that faith in Him, available only through the Means of Grace, is what he is talking about. He says again in 6:47, “He who believes has everlasting life.”

And yet Jesus also says (6:51) “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” It is here that so many falter. Is Jesus now talking about the Lord’s Supper? The NIV translation does not help. The Greek text reads: $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \tau\omicron\ \alpha\iota\tau\omicron\nu\ \delta\epsilon\ \tau\omicron\ \epsilon\omega\upsilon\delta\omega\varsigma\ \eta\ \sigma\alpha\rho\varsigma\ \mu\omicron\upsilon\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\ \nu\ \epsilon\pi\epsilon\kappa\ \tau\eta\upsilon\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \kappa\omicron\varsigma\mu\omicron\upsilon\ \zeta\omega\eta\varsigma$. Literally, “And the bread also which I will give my flesh is, for the world’s life.” John has taken care to insert not one but two conjunctions, $\kappa\alpha\iota$ / and $\delta\epsilon$ / yet a translation such as the NIV includes no conjunction whatever. KJV and RSV both insert one conjunction (the $\kappa\alpha\iota$ / at the beginning of the sentence). NASB, a literal yet fairly readable translation, includes both $\kappa\alpha\iota$ / and $\delta\epsilon$ / “and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh.”

The future indicative $\delta\omega\varsigma$ “I will give” is potentially misleading. It could certainly point to Jesus’ physical body, which would be offered for all mankind -- more than could, it *certainly* does. The problem here and the danger for Confessional Lutherans is that we believe what the Bible says about the Lord’s Supper: that Jesus’ actual body and blood are truly present in, with and under the elements in the Supper ($\tau\omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron\ \mu\omicron\upsilon\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\ \nu\ \tau\omicron\ \varsigma\omega\mu\alpha\ \tau\omicron\ \upsilon\pi\epsilon\kappa\ \tau\eta\ \u03c7\omega\mu\eta$, 1 Corinthians 11:24). Why, then couldn’t the Bread of Life spoken of throughout John 6 be this same body, as John 6:51 seems to indicate? It is actually the unbelievers around Jesus who help us to answer this question.

“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” they scoff, to which Jesus replies:

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.

(John 6:53-56)

Jesus' reply tells us that he is certainly not talking about the Lord's Supper. Notice that he says *whoever* eats and drinks this food has eternal life. Not everyone who partakes of the body and blood at the Supper will automatically enter into heaven. Paul tells us to be very careful about recognizing the Lord's actual body and blood when we receive communion, "for anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Corinthians 11:29). The same attributive, participial construction is used in both passages to indicate anyone with the characteristic of someone eating: Jesus in John 6:56 says ο(τρωγων "whoever munches" and Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:29 says ο(εσθιων "whoever eats."

David J. Ellis of Trent Park College disagrees with Jesus. He thinks the Lord is actually talking, directly or indirectly, about the Lord's Supper:

The question concerning the relationship of this saying to the Lord's Supper, in which those who partake do so by faith (1 Cor. 10:16) is inescapable. In the Synoptics the Lord's Supper is recorded primarily as that which the Lord Himself instituted. Here, however, we may see the teaching of the Lord Jesus which can only be fully understood in the light of the feast which he inaugurated, and which, without referring directly to that Supper, conveys truth which should give the Lord's Supper deep meaning for the believer.¹¹

Although Ellis attempts to distance himself from saying John 6 refers directly to the Lord's Supper, he nevertheless cannot completely break from the idea. Part of his difficulty may be in wanting to find a Lord's Supper text somewhere in John's Gospel. His comment that "here we may see the teaching of the Lord Jesus which can only be fully understood in the light of the feast which he inaugurated" betrays a failure to allow John 6 to stand by itself as a sermon by Jesus on faith.

The Belgian Roman Catholic theologian Jean Gribet also errs in his understanding of these verses:

My own feeling is that, despite some typically Johannine retouches ("for the life of the world") we have here a very clear allusion to the formula of

institution. Thus, although there is no account in the context of the last supper, John knew about it; and he regarded the eucharist as the memorial of the paschal event.¹²

Among Lutherans, John 6:53 has rarely if ever been taken to be a direct reference to Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. Lenski¹³ (492 f.) does not understand the passage this way. Adolph Spaeth¹⁴ does not, either. He has this to say:

The language used by the Lord in this section is strong meat, not only for the Jews of that time, but for Christians and believers of all times. This whole passage does not refer directly and specifically to the Lord's Supper, or the sacramental eating and drinking of his body and blood. The ordinance of the Lord's table, by Christ's direct appointment, has its own earthly, visible elements of bread and wine. Without these, we have no sacramental partaking of Christ, however closely we may be united with the Lord by faith.... But there is not the slightest reference to either bread or wine, the elements in the Lord's Supper. The Lord speaks of himself as the loving bread, very much in the same manner as he spoke of the loving water to the Samaritan woman.¹⁵

Martin Chemnitz minced no words when he discussed misuse of passages like John 6 with regard to the Lord's Supper:

Just as any doctrines of the church and individual articles of faith have their proper "seat" in certain passages of Scripture in which they are directly treated and explained, in such a way that the true and genuine sense of the doctrines themselves is to be correctly looked for and established with certainty from those passages, so it is beyond controversy that the right belief about the Lord's Supper has its very own passage and its proper basis in the words of institution.... For all the Sacramentarians, no matter how many they may be, take what they want to believe and think about the Lord's Supper not out of the words of institution, understood properly and simply, just as they sound, but they come with presuppositions drawn from other passages of Scripture, most of which say nothing about the Lord's Supper, then finally they take up the words of institution. After that they work and labor to force a view that has been formed from other passages on the words of institution by some figurative interpretation that does violence [to the text].¹⁶

Some appropriate words by WELS pastor Gary Baumler are in place:

Again and again Jesus came back to the truth (the) Jews resisted. By including his blood in the picture, he made sure they would be proven

wrong if they took him literally (Leviticus 17:12). But if they saw the Spiritual truth (Leviticus 17:11), they would see in Jesus' blood the blood of atonement. With the blood the reference to his sacrifice on Calvary was complete.

Some see this section as a reference to the Lord's Supper, but it cannot be, because the Lord's Supper was not yet instituted. This section is an extension of the Bread of Life declaration. Jesus is continuing the thought expressed already in verses 29 and 40: he who believes will live.¹⁷

Conclusion

Dogmatically, we must remember that the *usus* makes a sacrament. Without the words of institution, for instance, the elements are simple bread and wine, and no sacrament. Those elements were undoubtedly chosen by Jesus because they were common (and would continue to be so throughout history) and also because they were involved in the Passover. Only when the elements come together with the Word in the use (*usus*) Christ gave us (i.e. a meal consumed by people) is there a sacrament. Since the *other* elements involved in Lord's Supper (Christ's body and blood) are mistaken by some in a misinterpretation of John 6, it would be best to draw the bounds of what Scripture says so that we are absolutely clear.

1. The Lord's Supper is for believers.

The Lord's Supper is foremost for the benefit of believers, who partake of Jesus' body and blood as they eat and drink the bread and wine in the sacrament ("Take eat...take drink...this do").

2. It can be misused.

The Lord's Supper can also be taken to one's detriment, so an unbeliever also partakes of Jesus' body and blood when he eats and drinks the bread and wine (1 Corinthians 11:29).

3. It has two earthly elements.

If one were to take only one element (e.g. the bread alone), even with the words of institution, taken within the body of believers, there could be some doubt since Christ gave

us his Supper with two earthly elements. Since this is not a Sacrament of doubt but of reassurance and forgiveness, both elements should be administered and consumed (1 Corinthians 11:24,25).

4. *The words of institution are necessary with the elements.*

If one were to drink wine and eat bread (as at a meal at home) without the words of institution, there is no Lord's Supper (Proverbs 4:17; Lamentations 2:12; etc. One would assume there was bread served at the wedding at Cana, but there was no Lord's Supper.).

5. *It is not a cannibalistic eating and drinking.*

If one were to envision actually eating the physical body or drinking the physical blood of the corpse of the crucified Christ (on the Saturday before the first Easter, for example), there would likewise be no Lord's Supper and no benefit to the soul, since there is no Word of God in such a (literal) Capernaite eating and drinking, and neither is there any bread or wine (1 Corinthians 11:24,25). We must acknowledge that bread and wine must be present even in this extreme case for there to be truly the Lord's Supper.¹⁸

6. *John 6 must be referring to faith.*

When Jesus made his statements in John 6, he was referring neither to a Capernaite (cannibalistic) eating of his physical flesh, nor to a sacramental eating of his body and blood in the Supper he would institute approximately one year later. Once again, since Jesus had not yet instituted the Lord's Supper and in John 6 makes no mention of the words of institution, we must acknowledge that Jesus in John 6 is talking about a spiritual partaking through *faith*, and only that.

The misunderstanding about this "meal" in John 6 is due primarily to faulty Christology. When some insist that Christ is locally enclosed in heaven, then his actual presence in the Lord's Supper becomes impossible. But when Jesus sat down "at the right hand of the Father," we must realize what a "right hand man" is: he is someone who has authority and power and honor. Jesus has these things and more. Point 5 above is

intentionally vulgar because the error involved is so crass and outrageous. This is of course something we would never say from the pulpit, but it is the truth. Ezekiel spoke in vulgar terms as well, when the people became so sinfully stubborn that polite (even sane) language could no longer avail.

The “Bread of Life” discourse refers entirely to faith in Jesus Christ, who died to obliterate the debt of our sins. The body of Jesus Christ, given for us for the forgiveness of our sins a year after he spoke about the Bread of Life, is the object of our faith, and not the bread of which John speaks in chapter 6 of his gospel.

We can learn something from this debate about the way we interpret Scripture. When we discuss a doctrine, we must begin at the *sedes* passage or passages which discuss that topic, without allowing opinion or ulterior motive to cloud the words of the Bible itself. When Scripture does not say something, the Holy Spirit is intentionally *not saying something*. This is for our own benefit, for our eternal salvation, and to the glory of the living God.

¹ *The Eucharist in St. John's Gospel (Chapter 6)* by Jean Gilbert, reprinted in *Concilium Volume 40* (Pierre Benoit O.P. and Roland E. Murphy O. Carm., editors), New York: Paulist Press, 1969, page 67

² The ministry of John the Baptist, for example; compare John 1:6-42. Beginning with a focus on John as the harbinger sent from God, the evangelist paints the Baptizer like a meteor: he fills and dominates the scene until Jesus simply walks past. John's disciples leave him to follow the Christ he points to, and by verse 40 the reader is aware that John is so far in the background that one almost needs to reread the chapter to realize what has happened to the Baptizer.

³ Besides the words of Institution, John neglects to mention at least eleven miracles mentioned in all three synoptics, including raising Jairus' daughter and the boy from Nain from the dead. Instead, John chooses to devote a great deal of time describing the raising of Lazarus and illustrating the effect this had on the people and the role the event played in the road to Calvary (John 11:1-12:11).

⁴ A rough literal translation by this author is included to facilitate the reader.

⁵ Cf. Liddel-Scott, *καίνω* I. “anew, afresh.”

⁶ Matthew tells us that the number 5,000 did not include women and children. Mark reports that Jesus said they were “like sheep without a shepherd” and that eight months' wages would not have paid for the meal.

⁷ The inclusions of the names of specific apostles (Philip and Andrew) is a feature of John's gospel which shows that the author was clearly remembering details surrounding this remarkable event. It is hardly surprising that John would include his companions' names where he recalled something specific or even important concerning them. Compare John 12:20-22; 14:5, 8, 20.

⁸ Compare 2:13; 5:1; 7:2, 14; 10:22; 11:5; 12:12; and 13:1.

⁹ Matthew tells us how this led to a confrontation with the Pharisees and Mark highlights the miraculous healings which followed.

¹⁰ Although our emphasis is entirely on John 6, it is noteworthy that Mark adds something to this account that no one else does. Mark (who may have received his information from Peter -- had Peter learned modesty in his age?) does *not* recount Peter's attempt to walk with Jesus on the waves. But Mark does add this: After the wind died down, the disciples "were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened (αἰ τῶν καρδιᾶν ἠκάρδια πέπρωμεν)" (Mark 6:51b, 52). This may help explain why John adds so much of Jesus' instruction afterward.

¹¹ *A New Testament Commentary* (G.C.D. Howley, general editor; *John* commentary by David J. Ellis), Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1969, p. 267.

¹² *The Eucharist in St. John's Gospel (Chapter 6)* by Jean Gilbert, reprinted in *Concilium Volume 40* (Pierre Benoit O.P. and Roland E. Murphy O. Carm., editors), New York: Paulist Press, 1969, p. 66-67.

¹³ R.C.H. Lenski was a conservative ALC (American Lutheran Church) pastor of the early 20th century.

¹⁴ Spaeth was an LCA (Lutheran Church in America) pastor, president of the Pennsylvania Ministerium at the close of the 19th century as well as a professor at the Philadelphia Seminary and President of the General Council (1880-1888).

¹⁵ Spaeth, Adolph. *Annotations on the Gospel According to St. John*. New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1895. Page 93.

¹⁶ Quoted in *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Dogmatics Notes Vol. II* by John P. Meyer (based on notes by Adolph Hoenecke), page 75. Printed by WLS Seminary Mimeographing Committee 1941-1942, reprinted 1979, revised 1985.

¹⁷ Baumler, Gary P., *The People's Bible--John*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997. Page 104.

¹⁸ This outrageous statement is necessarily made in order to draw a complete dogmatic border around the words of institution. There can be no mistake in any way about exactly what the words say and exactly what they do not say. Misunderstanding and misapplication of these words is too rampant in the world for us to leave any doubt whatsoever about what the Bible says, even to the point of the absurd.

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