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Once More to John 6*

David P. Scaer

Some years ago, a now-deceased colleague and a life-long opponent of the eucharistic interpretation of John 6 found himself preaching from this chapter in the chapel of Concordia Theological Seminary. He was as much a scholar as he was one who lived existentially, especially as he lived out his last four months. Knowing death was near, he rejected any suggestion of prolonging life through additional medical treatment and proceeded to enjoy his last summer by visiting his children. In preaching, his characteristically existential bent frequently took command of his hermeneutical principles, which themselves did not allow him to see John 6 as eucharistic.

In preaching on the controverted pericope, he found himself caught in the currents of the text and slipped into an extemporaneous eucharistic interpretation. The surface language of John 6, which is eucharistic—as even the opponents of this interpretation admit—had broken his previous scholarly restraints.¹ In the moment of proclamation, faith's intuitive finger had pressed the override button, prevailing over the preacher's own life-long commitment to the traditional Lutheran hesitancy to see a eucharistic message anywhere in John, including, and especially, in the sixth chapter. Perhaps many other Lutheran pastors have been caught in the same dilemma. Even Luther himself, while flatly denying a sacramental spin to chapter 6 in his lectures on the Fourth Gospel, could pen a beautiful Easter hymn which clearly reflected a eucharistic understanding of John 6.²

* This is a slightly revised version of an essay that was first published in *Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord: Essays in Honor of Glen Zweck on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday* (Houston: The Zweck Festschrift Committee, 2000), 217–233. It is printed here with the permission of the editors of the festschrift.

¹ Inevitably, Johannine commentators who are opposed to a eucharistic interpretation of John 6 find themselves obligated to explain why it is not eucharistic. This fact alone is telling.

² Martin Luther, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands," *Lutheran Service Book* 458:7 (hereafter *LSB*).

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I. Rethinking John 6

Both Luther and Zwingli agreed that the eating and drinking language of John 6 described faith as grasping hold of salvation.³ However, Zwingli proceeded to use 6:63, “the flesh profits nothing,” against a physical eating and drinking of Christ’s body and blood in order to support his view that salvation is conveyed by the Spirit and not the sacraments.⁴ Luther based his arguments for the real presence on the Synoptic and Pauline words of institution, “This is my body,” and did not allow John 6 to enter the debate. Luther’s removal of John 6 from the eucharistic playing field has deprived Lutheran theology of what is arguably the most extensive and detailed discourse in the New Testament on the nature of the Lord’s Supper and its benefits. John 6 has incarnation, atonement, forgiveness, and resurrection all woven within a eucharistic cloth.

Perhaps the most convincing and also the most overlooked evidence that John 6 is eucharistic is that the *order* of the words of institution in the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus calls the bread his body (τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ σῶμά μου; Matt 26:26), is reversed in John’s Gospel, where Jesus says that he is the bread (ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς; 6:48). Switching subject nouns with predicate nominatives may be grammatically precarious, but in this case the Synoptic and Johannine versions inform one another to provide a full eucharistic theology. It is as if each is providing a commentary on the other. Andreas Karlstadt’s interpretation—which even Zwingli did not accept—that with the words “This is my body” Jesus was pointing to himself and not to consecrated bread, loses its force, since in the light of John 6 Jesus calls himself “bread.”

Historical, dogmatical, and exegetical objections have been raised against the eucharistic interpretation of John 6. Chief among the historical objections is the opposition of Luther and the dogmaticians. The historical objection certainly carries with it a bit of nostalgia. A dogmatic objection is that a eucharistic interpretation would make the Lord’s Supper the one thing necessary for salvation, a point that cannot be conceded, especially since salvation is *sola fide*. An exegetical objection is that when Jesus spoke

³ W. P. Stephens, “Zwingli on John 6:63: ‘Spiritus est qui vivificat, caro nihil prodest,’” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 160, 168–169, 173.

⁴ Stephens, “Zwingli on John 6:63,” 180, “. . . [Zwingli] does not regard the eucharist as the subject of John 6 . . .” and 181, “However, Zwingli always insists that faith comes only from the Spirit and speaks of the sacraments as giving simply historical faith.”

about “flesh and blood,” he had not yet instituted the Lord’s Supper. These objections will be addressed in the following discourse.

Luther’s opposition to the eucharistic interpretation, which set the tone for Lutheran theology after him, surfaced in his Marburg debate with Zwingli in October 1529. His exegesis of the biblical texts usually employed a radical sacramentality. His non-sacramental approach in John was uncharacteristic of his exegesis, which can be seen as reaching an apex in his *Lectures on Genesis*, which were delivered in the last ten years of his life (1535–1545). Genesis was not even a New Testament book, yet Luther found the sacraments everywhere.

John 6, however, presented special considerations. Rome had used the argument that since blood was already in the flesh, the laity need receive only the consecrated bread in the Sacrament. Physiologically, this argument that flesh and blood are so coterminous as to be inseparable might have some validity. This is also true of certain, perhaps the majority of, biblical references to flesh and blood. Such phrases as “flesh and blood shall not inherit the kingdom of God,” and “flesh and blood has not revealed it to you” have the same referent as “flesh” in “what is born of the flesh is flesh.” “Flesh and blood” or simply “flesh” means “human nature in opposition to God.” In the context of the Passover, into which the John 6 narrative is placed, “flesh and blood” suggest “sacrifice,” and in this case suggest Christ’s sacrifice as atonement (6:51). Blood leaving the body or flesh signals that death has occurred and a sacrifice is accomplished. In depriving the laity of the chalice, Rome’s argument that blood was already in the flesh was hardly more than an excuse for a practice that had been instituted for other reasons.

On the other side of the coin, in offering a symbolical meaning of the Lord’s Supper, Zwingli found a useful argument in “the flesh profits nothing” (6:63). Here was the evidence he needed to support his view that Christ was not physically present in the Lord’s Supper, or for that matter anywhere else on earth.⁵ Rome’s use of John 6 to deprive the laity of the chalice and Zwingli’s use of the same chapter to deny a physical eating of Christ’s body provided enough reason to keep John 6 out of or remove it from any eucharistic debate. The Lutherans were cutting their losses, sacrificing their legions, and determining to fight the battle on the Synoptic and Pauline battlefields.

⁵ For a fuller discussion of the influence of both Erasmus and Augustine on Zwingli, see Stephens, “Zwingli on John 6:63,” 160–162.

Another problem would present itself in John 6:54, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood ye have not life in yourselves" (KJV). Here it was suggested that the Lord's Supper was as necessary as faith for salvation. It is on the basis of this passage that the eastern church communes infants, a practice that Luther did not know since the West had given it up long before the Reformation.⁶ He did not, however, condemn it.

II. Keeping *Sola Fide* out of the Debate

Since the *sola fide* principle of the Reformation appears to be at stake, it might be best to address this question first. That which is "necessary for salvation" belongs more properly to the area of pastoral practice and should be kept out of theology proper, especially in making it a basis for a theological system. The end result of beginning theology with "what is necessary" is the kind of minimalism offered by Bultmann and the gospel reductionism associated with Seminex in the Missouri Synod controversies of the 1970s. When the question of what is absolutely necessary is imposed upon the exegetical task, the results can be disastrous.

Likewise, in the case of John 6, having to choose between faith or Eucharist as "necessary for salvation" will produce the same results as if we had been forced to choose between faith and Baptism in John 3! Must the sacramental interpretation of John 3 be forsaken in order to protect the *sola fide* principle? Must the sacramental interpretation of John 6 be forsaken in order to do the same? Or is it more necessary to surrender a sacramental meaning in John 6 than it is in John 3? Not only is "the tail wagging the dog," we may actually be starting at the wrong end of the dog.

In their respective theologies, it was Zwingli and not Luther who saw a physical understanding of the sacraments contradicting faith as the only requirement for salvation. Lutherans, however, have not been averse to giving Zwingli's principle a Lutheran hue. In a Lutheran playing off of faith against the Eucharist, faith becomes a thing, an autonomous substance that challenges the Sacrament for pride of place in the Christian life. A sacramental interpretation of John 6, so it is argued, would militate against the cardinal article on justification in Augsburg Confession IV, which holds that faith alone is necessary for salvation. Yet properly understood, faith has no life of its own but only that which Christ gives it in the sacrament. The Eucharist does not displace faith's function in the plan of

⁶ Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959), 179-180.

salvation but gives faith its substance. Seeing the role of faith in John's Gospel certainly does not militate against the eucharistic interpretation but in fact requires it. Hermann Sasse notes that interpreting the eating and drinking of John 6 as "faith" does not rule out the involvement of a physical eating and drinking.⁷ We go further and assert that the Eucharist provides faith with its form and content, in the spirit of 1 Corinthians 11:26. God's action in the Eucharist summons faith as the believer's appropriate response. This "either-or" argument—that one must choose between either faith or Christ's body and blood—is purely Zwinglian!

Another argument against positing the eucharistic interpretation is that such an assertion leads to the erosion of the doctrine of Baptism as the foundational sacrament of the church.⁸ This argument proves too much. Taken seriously, perhaps we should dispense with the Eucharist altogether in order to appreciate Baptism more. Then possibly we should dispense with Baptism for the sake of honoring preaching. The argument's weakness is that it fails to distinguish between the unique characteristics of preaching, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, a weakness that is unfortunately a common bane among even the most conservative of Lutherans.

In denying any sacramental significance to John 6, Zwingli provided the model for Reformed biblical scholars, who in turn have gone on to influence Lutheran scholars.⁹ Consider Leon Morris, whose commentary on John is regularly used in conservative Lutheran seminaries. Morris holds that a eucharistic interpretation would require the damnation of anyone not receiving the sacrament. He uses the same argument against seeing a baptismal reference to the water in John 3:5, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Lutheran opponents of the eucharistic interpretation in John 6 seem blissfully unaware that the same argument is used against Baptism. Or perhaps they deliberately choose to ignore this, which is even worse.

Even after Luther had adopted his non-eucharistic interpretation of John 6 in 1520, he used the language of John 6 in his referring to the Lord's Supper as the "medicine of immortality." In his 1527 treatise against

⁷ Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 178.

⁸ It is also argued that a eucharistic interpretation would require that infants be communed. However, the age of first communion for Luther and the Lutherans is a matter of practice and not dogma, and fellowship with the eastern church could never be refused on these grounds.

⁹ Stephens observes the following about Zwingli's interpretation of John 6:29: "the work through which we obtain food is faith in Christ and not eating the body bodily. There would otherwise be two ways of salvation." "Zwingli on John 6:63," 169.

Zwingli, *This Is My Body*, Luther used the language of John 6:63 in holding that Christ's body is the same imperishable food, for "whether it enters the mouth or the heart, it is the same body."¹⁰ Luther showed a similar inconsistency in citing the epistle of James after he had ejected it from the canon. And, as mentioned earlier, the last stanza of Luther's Easter hymn, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands," comes straight from John 6, though it may be claimed that he penned these words quite early. Somehow the situation in which the Reformer found himself provided cause for suspending his usual procedures to serve what he saw as a greater purpose. Without question, the greater purpose in the eucharistic debate was upholding a physical eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. This issue became more pressing for Luther, since Zwingli had boasted that with John 6:63 he was going to break Luther's neck.¹¹

III. Dogmatics and Exegesis: Mixing Apples and Oranges

Some objections to the eucharistic reading of John 6 combine dogmatic and exegetical arguments and introduce the *analogia fidei* argument where its place is questionable. If only believers can receive the Lord's Supper (dogmatic argument), then John 6, which is addressed to unbelievers (exegetical conclusion), cannot be sacramental.

This argument can also be spun around. If John 6 is addressed to believers (exegetical conclusion), then any reference to the Eucharist granting salvation is redundant since believers are already saved (dogmatic argument). This line of thought is a variant of the argument that, if we are saved by faith, we cannot be saved by participating in the Eucharist.¹² This argument, essential to Zwingli's denial of the physical eating of Christ's body, makes faith a means of grace in place of the sacraments. Problematic for the adherents of this argument is that if eating and drinking the flesh and blood of Jesus is equivalent to the demand to believe in him,¹³ why was it addressed to those who already believe in him? Yet if the demand to eat and drink Christ's body and blood is a demand to participate in a higher reality than what they are now experiencing by faith in the gospel, then in light of such eucharistic language as eat, drink, blood and even

¹⁰ AE 37:100; cf. 37:118.

¹¹ Stephens, "Zwingli on John 6:63," 153.

¹² Stephens, "Zwingli on John 6:63," 153.

¹³ This is Zwingli's position: "Christ is not speaking of this sacrament but is preaching the gospel under the figure of eating his flesh and drinking his blood." Stephens, "Zwingli on John 6:63," 174.

flesh, the eucharistic interpretation certainly is not only possible, but probable.¹⁴

A third argument against the eucharistic rendering of John 6 is that it would imply that unbelievers participating in the Lord's Supper receive eternal life. This would contradict Paul's view that some participants in the Sacrament receive it to their judgment. This argument is seriously flawed, since Paul is speaking of a temporal punishment of death for believers and not an eternal condemnation for unbelievers. Non-Christians not only did not receive the Sacrament but they were not even present for its celebration. Leon Morris argues that the vocabulary of John 6 does not correspond with the eucharistic vocabulary of the other New Testament references to the Lord's Supper.¹⁵ He notes that "flesh is not the ordinary word for the Eucharist in the New Testament."¹⁶ Morris is more motivated by the Zwinglian influence in his Reformed bias than he is by the biblical evidence. "Body" in the Synoptic Gospels and "flesh" in John both translate the Hebrew and the Aramaic *בָּשָׂר*. Other words such as "eat," "bread," "drink," and "blood" are eucharistic terms that are common to the Synoptics, John, and Paul. Yet all five terms agree in that what is devoured by the mouth is the cause of salvation.¹⁷

Not incidentally, John's statement "The bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world" (6:51) strikingly resembles Luke's "This is my body given for you" (22:19). In Matthew, blood sacrificially poured out for many (26:28) corresponds to John's bread, which is Christ's flesh given for the life of the world (John 6:51). Matthew locates the cause of salvation in Christ's blood, John finds it in his flesh, and Paul and Luke ascribe salvific power to both the body and the blood. In regard to either eucharistic element, the body or the blood, Matthew sees an atonement for the "many" (a word indicating "church"), John views an atonement for the world (which fits his "universalistic" theme),¹⁸ and Paul and Luke offer

¹⁴ Zwingli dismisses the view that Christ is issuing an invitation to believe that the eucharistic bread is his body, since this would offer another way of salvation. Stephens, "Zwingli on John 6:63," 173.

¹⁵ On the vocabulary issue, see James Voelz, "The Discourse on the Bread of Life in John 6: Is It Eucharistic?" *Concordia Journal* 15, no. 1 (1989): 31-32.

¹⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 376-377.

¹⁷ Voelz writes, "Therefore this discourse is worded in such a way that its words cause Christian hearers to think about the oral eating of the Sacrament of the Altar, . . . while at the same time they point beyond the oral eating to the spiritual eating." Voelz, "The Discourse on the Bread of Life in John 6," 34.

¹⁸ To the issue of vocabulary, John is not only idiosyncratic in using "flesh" instead of "body," but he uses "water" for "baptism," as in John 3. Paul and all the evangelists,

salvation “for you.” To repeat, John 6 agrees with the Synoptic Gospels and Paul in that what is devoured in the Eucharist is the cause of salvation.

Another favorite exegetical argument against the eucharistic interpretation is that the sacrament had not been instituted.¹⁹ We are as much amused as we are baffled at this objection, for at least two reasons. First, Jesus, like the Old Testament prophets, consistently provided explanations of events before they happened. Nothing ever happens by surprise, whether it be the flood, the destruction of Sodom, the fall of Jerusalem, or Christ’s resurrection. Such events are not only predicted but are defined before they take place. Why should an exception be made for Baptism and Eucharist? Even Reformed scholars concede that Jesus gave instructions regarding the Eucharist before its institution.

Secondly, the view that the evangelist could not be writing about the Lord’s Supper assumes that the material in the Gospels is arranged chronologically like diaries, examples of which are those English Bibles that conveniently—and nearly in all cases erroneously—date the sayings and acts of Jesus. Gospels are not diaries but post-resurrection, interpretative, theological commentaries on what Jesus said and did (John 2:22; 12:16; 21:25). All four evangelists, and not just John, wrote their Gospels after and in the light of the resurrection within the real-life church situations in which the authors found themselves. With the exception of the birth, death, and resurrection narratives, the Gospels are theologically arranged, not necessarily according to time sequence, but according to

including John, use “flesh” as a totally negative description of humankind as ignorant opposition to God. “Flesh and blood” do not understand the things of God and cannot inherit his kingdom. John, however, raises the word “flesh” to a new level, since in coming to man’s redemption, the eternal Word of God assumes flesh. The flesh assumed by the Son of God no longer opposes God but gives life to the world. Whoever wants to live forever must eat of the flesh which by the incarnation gives life. This flesh and not manna is the real bread from heaven. The phrase “The flesh profits nothing” (6:63) annuls neither the incarnation or the life-giving quality of Christ’s flesh in the Eucharist, but rather describes those who refuse to eat the life-giving bread from heaven. They are “in the flesh” because they do not recognize that God himself is hidden in the flesh of Jesus. Hence the Creed’s incarnation phrase, *incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto*, anticipates the eucharistic belief that the flesh of Jesus is the life-giving bread in the Sacrament. John adheres to his original meaning that flesh by itself is sinful, but in Christ “flesh” shares in all God’s glory. That is, “Christ’s flesh profiteth everything,” as Luther implies: “again we should like to be assured that ‘FLESH IS OF NO AVAIL’ is said concerning Christ’s body.” See his remarks in AE 37:145; emphasis original.

¹⁹ Luther, too, used this argument in AE 36:19. Against this argument, one may also consult James Voelz, “The Discourse on the Bread of Life in John 6,” 35.

topics. Topics progress in an ascending order, so that at the conclusion of the Gospel the catechesis of the believer culminates with Baptism and Eucharist, a participation in the great mysteries of Jesus' death and resurrection.

A chronological approach to the Gospel may provide a distorted interpretation. For example, in Matthew the evangelist tells about the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, even though it has not yet happened in the narrative (10:4)! Mark (3:19) and Luke (6:16) mention Judas as traitor even earlier in their Gospels. Elsewhere Jesus tells Christians both that they will be persecuted (Matt 5:10-12) and that they are to take up their crosses (Matt 10:38). Without understanding these dire words in light of Christ's suffering, which is only revealed later in the narrative, such words could easily be understood as suggesting that suffering has a value in itself. The words in the Lord's Prayer, "and forgive us our trespasses," are presented in Matthew ten chapters before the announcement of the death of Jesus and fourteen chapters before the meaning of his death as atonement is presented. Are we to believe that God's forgiving us in the Lord's Prayer or our forgiving one another has nothing to do with Jesus' atonement and death? Without the foundation of Christ's death, the Lord's Prayer degenerates into moralisms in which forgiving one another is simply a good policy. This kind of ethical behavior can be expected of and admired even in unbelievers.

Early on, John leaves obvious clues that those who heard his Gospel were already acquainted with the concluding events in the life of Jesus (2:22; 6:70-71). This is as true for Christ's death and resurrection as it is for Baptism and the Eucharist. Gospels are not missionary but catechetical documents. Early Christians were acquainted with the Supper, which certainly had been instituted by the time the Fourth Gospel was written. The argument that John 6 is not eucharistic because the Lord's Supper had not yet been instituted exposes a remarkable ignorance about what the Gospels are. The real fallacy behind this objection is that we cannot speak of the Sacrament at all unless we speak of the words of institution.

IV. Inconsistent Piety

In spite of a virtually official, non-eucharistic interpretation of John 6, Lutherans do use the language of this discourse in their sermons, hymns, and devotions in order to promote the characteristic Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper. An approach that allows a certain interpretation in sermons and liturgical life but which contradicts standard exegetical tradition leaves something to be desired, especially for a church that prides itself in standing under the *sola scriptura*. Such an approach draws things

from the text that had never entered the mind of the evangelist or his readers, let alone Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Some opponents of a eucharistic interpretation allow their piety a latitude that their exegesis denies. In spite of the exegetical conclusions, they use and tolerate the language of John 6 in hymns such as "O Living Bread from Heaven"²⁰ or "Lord Jesus Christ, Life-Giving Bread,"²¹ both penned by Johann Rist (1607-1667). This is eating your devotional cake, even if your exegesis cannot demonstrate the existence of a cake. What Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the evangelist did not intend, Christian piety creates. Schleiermacher, *vivis!*

Unbelief in the Face of the Eucharist

The argument that John 6 is addressed to an unbelieving crowd of Jews, and hence makes a eucharistic interpretation impossible, was mentioned earlier. This argument overlooks the fact that the disciples and not just the anonymous crowds are guilty of unbelief (6:60). Jesus' question to Philip about obtaining bread for the crowds elicits the unbelieving response that even if there was money, there was no store nearby to make the purchase. Andrew is unbelieving in asking how a boy's fish and loaves can feed such a large crowd (6:5-9). John 6 not only uncovers eucharistic unbelief but also incarnational unbelief, and this not only among the Jews but also among the disciples, who themselves fail to recognize who Jesus really is. Both the disciples and the crowds do not come to terms with Jesus as God's Son. At Jesus' invitation to eat and drink his flesh and blood, unbelievers grind their teeth in rebellion and ridicule him as Joseph's son and not God's Son. Their denial of the incarnation surfaces in their refusing to eat the flesh of Jesus and drink his blood. Some would-be followers now leave (6:67). Crowds do not believe and the disciples only reluctantly see that the multiplied loaves are only passing shadows of Jesus, who himself is the true bread. At the end of the discourse, Peter confesses that Jesus' words must be accepted at face value and believed for eternal life. Peter believes, but without fully understanding.

Eucharist as Necessary for Salvation

As mentioned earlier, especially problematic in a Lutheran context is the position that a eucharistic interpretation of the discourse requires this sacrament as necessary for salvation. We have already pointed out the inconsistent self-generosity of those who make exceptions for a baptismal

²⁰ *LSB* 642.

²¹ *LSB* 625.

necessity found in John 3,²² yet refuse to do so for a eucharistic necessity in John 6.²³ The Reformed are consistent in their disposing of the sacraments in both John 3 and 6.

The dilemma of an absolute necessity for Baptism and the Lord's Supper in John's Gospel is not without resolution. John's prologue states that Jesus, who is with God and is the world's creator, is the light who enlightens everyone coming into the world (1:9). There are no exceptions. He enlightens everyone: a beautiful absolute universalism, if it were not for the near-total contradiction of sin. A universal salvation dwindles to a remnant, so that Jesus is rejected not only by the world that he himself created, but by the people he chose as his own as well. Insult is added to injury. God's judgment against unbelief in no way nullifies his intention to enlighten everyone who comes into the world. This universalistic motif translates into how God sees believers as totally perfect saints, all of whom believe him without doubts, are without exception baptized, and so receive the Eucharist under both kinds.

The divine reality—what God really sees and what we can only know by faith—is contradicted by the realities that we see: the world rejects Jesus, the disciples doubt to the point of unbelief, Nicodemus rejects Baptism, and the Jews make Christ's invitation to eat his flesh and drink his blood out to be a cause of their own unbelief.

This unbelief, which hesitates at finding Christ in the sacraments, still divides Christians. Further, it often causes those with a right understanding to hesitate at receiving Christ in the sacraments. Inconsistencies in Christian belief and practice are necessary effects of an evil world infecting God's realm. God's grace in the gospel and in the sacraments is constant and remains forever absolute. It may be contradicted but not annulled.

V. Suspending the Hermeneutical Rules

A non-eucharistic interpretation of John 6 requires allegorizing the text in order that "eating and drinking" become "faith," and "flesh and blood" become "Christ's teaching," though there is nothing in the text suggesting this procedure. Allegorizing, which is not allowed by some Lutheran exegetes for the purpose of interpreting the parables, suddenly becomes acceptable in the interpretation of John 6, which is not parabolic. It is as if

²² John 3:5: "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'"

²³ John 6:53: "So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.'"

they are bent on a non-eucharistic interpretation at all costs. Left unresolved is how the spiritual eating of Christ's body is distinguished from the spiritual drinking of his blood (6:53-56). More to the point, a non-sacramental reading of John 6—which requires a figurative interpretation of “eating” as “belief in Christ”—provides no satisfactory explanation of 1) how the eating of the manna is a physical eating (v. 49), or 2) how the eating required of Christians (6:50-51) is only the figurative eating done in faith.²⁴ A non-eucharistic interpretation of John breaks the hermeneutical rule that the meaning of the word is determined by its context. Suddenly the *unus sensus literalis est* becomes inoperative for them. Unless the eating of the manna in the wilderness is a parabolic eating, can the eating of Christ's body be a parabolic reference to faith. Perhaps some commentators may find a natural cause for the eating of manna and the quail; none would find the eating to be allegorical. Even within the terms of a legend or a tale, eating is real eating.²⁵

Also problematic for the figurative interpretation of eating is that John not only speaks of eating the flesh of Jesus (*ἐσθίω*), but chewing at it with one's teeth (*τρώγω*). Both verbs speak of eating, but the second one with the tearing of flesh is more picturesque. John uses exaggerated language to emphasize the truth that Christ's body is really consumed by the mouth. Such emphatic language is common for him. Jesus not only became *anthropos*, a human being, but he became *sarx*, humanity in its opposition to God. Eating flesh as a metaphor for faith is problematic, since eating someone's flesh is a metaphor for a hostile action. Satan is an eater of the flesh, “the slanderer and adversary par excellence.”²⁶ Similarly the drinking of human blood is a horrendous thing. The only favorable use of such horrendous

²⁴ John 6:49-51: “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (RSV).

²⁵ In the controversy over the Lord's Supper, Luther was willing to let an unbeliever determine whether the words, “this is my body,” were in any sense figurative or whether they had to be taken at face value. We do not want to put this forward as an acceptable form of biblical interpretation, but for the sake of argument we mention the case of Porphyry of Tyre (AD 233-305). An enemy of the church, he created a compendium entitled *Against the Christians in Fifteen Books* (AD 270). He saw the requirement of John 6:54 of eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood worse than anything cannibals could do. Porphyry was thoroughly acquainted with Christianity and knew the ancient church's position in this matter. See David Laird Dugan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 89-97.

²⁶ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 284.

eating of flesh and drinking of blood is the eucharistic interpretation in which for our salvation we eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood.

Excursus

Both Pietism and Rationalism took the Bible and the right of interpretation out of the church. Our experiences with the Bible in classrooms and lecture halls stand in contradiction both to the origins of the Old Testament in the worshiping congregation of Israel and to the Gospels and Epistles in the churches. Churches were not crowds in fields and arenas, but baptized assemblies preparing to receive the Eucharist. The sacraments constituted the apostolic church's life and gave it its outward form. Without sacraments they were not and could not be church. Christ was not only in the sacramental elements but he was the one administering them. Believers were made holy precisely because they were baptized, and by receiving the body of the resurrected one they received the medicine of immortality and the promise of the resurrection. Scriptures were sacramental first in the sense that they brought converts to Baptism and the Lord's Supper and thus incorporated them into the church as the body of Christ. They continued to be not only sacramental for believers because they were reports about Christ's life, but especially because Christ himself was their author and was, through the hearing of his words, still pleading to find life with him. This is true of the Synoptic Gospels, but it was especially true of the Fourth Gospel, where John weaves baptismal and eucharistic themes from the beginning to the end. It is not simply a matter of isolating the eucharistic theme in John 6, but rather seeing the discourse on the Bread from Heaven within the sacramental fiber of the entire Gospel. The prologue necessitates that one adopt a sacramental consciousness in order to understand the theology of this Gospel. By his incarnation Jesus becomes the principle sacrament of salvation and, in the process, sacramentalizes all creation. Soteriology and Christology are interconnected in John, and their nexus occurs with the sacramental Christ living in the sacramental community. The wedding of Cana introduces the sacramental elements of water and wine. Water points both back to John's baptism and ahead to the account of Nicodemus and the woman at the well who is invited by Jesus to drink the living water. Cana's miraculous wine prepares the hearer for Jesus's claim that he is the real vine. Both elements flow gloriously from the Savior's side. So the new, true, and real Adam gives life to the new Eve, which is his church. Believers who are introduced to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world know that the bread of the eucharist is the flesh that Jesus gives for the life of the world. In one case, water can symbolize Baptism and in

another the Eucharist, or it may mean both simultaneously. Even the metaphors of Jesus—the door, the vine, the good shepherd—are sacramental.

Judas and the Night of the Betrayal

The Synoptic accounts of the Eucharist include Judas's betrayal of Jesus, an event so significant that Paul begins his account of the Last Supper with the words, "on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took bread." Judas betrays Jesus in connection with the institution of the church's most sacred rite. John closes the account of Jesus as the living bread with a reference to the betrayal of Judas (6:70–71). Thus the original hearers of the Gospel already knew in listening to John 6 that Judas had betrayed Jesus in connection with the Last Supper. Those who heard the Gospel already knew certain things about the Lord's Supper. This interpretation is confirmed when Jesus gives the morsel to Judas (John 13:24–30).

Other Eucharistic Clues

In the apostolic church, *Pascha*, the word for Passover, meant the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus as one unified Easter event, which was thereby commemorated by the Eucharist (1 Cor 5:7). This is the occasion for John 6 (v. 4).²⁷ Of John's three Passover accounts, the last one provides the occasion for the death of Jesus. Jesus—and not the lambs slaughtered for the Jewish holiday—is the real Passover: "not a bone of him shall be broken" (John 19:36). The Jewish Passover was a sacramental celebration of God's rescuing Israel from Egypt. Blood of a slaughtered

²⁷ Christ by his death passed through the Sea, and the church by Baptism shared in his being saved by God. All this has already been suggested to John's readers by the Baptizer's announcement that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This theme reoccurs in John 6, where Jesus says that the flesh he gives for eating by believers is the same flesh by which life is won for the world. The world, which stands in the same relationship of enmity with God as the flesh does, is now, like the flesh, transformed. A world doomed to damnation is transformed by the death of Christ so that it no longer is destined to death but is instead transformed into life. One who shares in Christ's flesh in the sacrament also shares in Christ's resurrection so the flesh in the sacrament becomes the medicine of immortality. The presence of faith is essential to this pericope. Those who have faith, namely Peter and the disciples, know what Jesus is talking about. Unbelievers also know that Jesus is talking not only about the necessity of believing but the necessity of participating in him through the Sacrament. It is because they know exactly what he is talking about that they turn against him. Drinking animal blood is forbidden and repulsive, and drinking human blood is unforgivable cannibalism. Yet, as the atonement has transformed the world, so also the incarnation transformed the flesh and blood of Jesus into the flesh and blood of God. It is the flesh and blood of God that transforms all those who receive those elements.

lamb spared the first-born son from death, and the lamb's flesh was eaten. Jesus is identified as the Lamb of God first at his baptism (John 1:29) and then again at his death (19:36). His blood spares us from death and his flesh is as much our food as was the Passover lamb for the Jews. John expands the Passover theme by identifying Jesus as the heavenly manna, the true and living bread. Jews who ate manna and the 5,000 who ate the miraculous bread died, but whoever feeds on Jesus lives forever and will be raised from the dead. Passover lamb and heavenly manna constitute one flesh and one food.

Another eucharistic clue is that the blessing of the bread and fish follows the eucharistic formula (6:11) found in the other Gospels and Paul. Similarly, the sacred crumbs, the *κλάσματα*, must be gathered and not destroyed, a reserved host, so to speak (6:12). The crumbs, like the bread of the Eucharist, have been made holy by the Lord's blessing.

Still another eucharistic clue is found in Jesus' saying that the one who comes to him shall never thirst (6:35). This is strange because eating bread and fish have nothing to do with drinking; but drinking itself does have a lot to do with the Eucharist. "Drinking" recalls the account of the woman at the Samaritan well (John 4), which anticipates Jesus's prediction that from his heart will flow living waters (John 7). The Jordan, Cana, and Tiberias are foundational for the church as the places where Christ began providing the shape for the sacraments. This shape was given in its final form when the Savior provided the content in the blood and water that flowed from his side.²⁸ John 6 combines incarnational, sacramental, and sacrificial themes into one reality. Where there is incarnation, there is sacrifice; where there is sacrifice, there is sacrament. The wedding of Cana, the cleansing of the temple, the healing waters, the Samaritan well, the imagery of both the shepherd and the vine, and the water and blood flowing from the side of Jesus are only some of John's sacramental themes. The *unus sensus literalis est* is often invoked as an argument against sacramental interpretations, but to the contrary this principle clearly requires that we uncover a sacramental interpretation in the very fiber of John's Gospel.

²⁸ John 4:46: "So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine." John 6:23: "However, boats from Tiberias came near the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks." At these places Jesus began to give us the Eucharist, just as he began to give us Baptism in the Jordan. Thus John 10:40, "He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John first baptized, and there he remained." It can also be noted that Cana and the miraculous feeding are occasions in which the disciples believe.

VI. A Post-Easter Hermeneutic

The disciples to whom the words of Jesus are entrusted do not understand the things that Jesus has done until he has been raised from the dead (John 2:22). Near the beginning of his Gospel, John has set forth his hermeneutical principle that only Christ's resurrection will provide the full and conclusive meaning of his words. A post-Easter church celebrating the Eucharist understood these words in the light of her own sacramental practice. Jesus in John was speaking not only to his first disciples, but to all his baptized disciples still gathering at his altar. The feeding of the 5,000 was miraculous, but not as miraculous as what would later happen at the altar where Jesus feeds his church—the redeemed world and God's new humanity—with his flesh and blood.

John 6 is the chessboard on which the traditional hermeneutical rules are either ignored or shown to be inadequate. In making John 6 a discourse on faith, the *unus sensus literalis est*—which interprets “eating” as really “eating” and not “faith,” and “flesh” as really “flesh”—is replaced by a purely allegorical interpretation in which these words are given a different meaning. Then there is the rule that the so-called clear passages determine the meaning of the unclear ones. Zwingli's denial of a physical eating in the sacrament was dependent on the same rule! For him, “the flesh profits nothing” was so “clear” as to demand a figurative meaning of “This is my body.”²⁹ This requires another essay on analyzing rules that waft the air of infallibility to some of us. Luther's genius becomes evident in not allowing Zwingli to play his trump card, “the flesh profits nothing,” thus forcing him instead to the words, “This is my body.” Luther allowed himself a method that we should, or at least may, allow. In a different situation the reformer may have allowed his intuition to follow his instincts to develop a eucharistic interpretation of John 6. His situation did not allow him this luxury. Ours does.

²⁹ Stephens, “Zwingli on John 6:63,” 171–172.