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On the Eucharist

Talk #5

*The Eucharist in the New Testament;
Bread of Life Discourse*



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The Eucharist in the New Testament; Bread of Life Discourse

In the first two talks of this series we saw that the Eucharist is not something marginal in the life of the Church or in Christ's work, but stands at the very center of the mission of the Word Incarnate and of the Kingdom He founded. The same reasons for which Word became flesh are the reasons for which He instituted the Eucharist. This centrality of the Eucharist is borne out by the New Testament. In this talk we shall look at John 6, in which we find Jesus' clearest explanation of the Eucharist as a sacrament of spiritual nourishment, and the accounts of the institution of the Eucharist.

Jesus sets the scene for His teaching on the Eucharist in the Bread of Life discourse by working the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand the day before. To understand both the multiplication of the loaves and the bread of life discourse, it is necessary to realize that Jews were expecting the Messiah to recapitulate the miracles of the Exodus. One of those miracles was Moses' providing food from heaven for the Israelites as they wandered in the desert for forty years. The Messiah, understood as a new Moses, would be one who would likewise provide abundance of bread for the Messianic kingdom of Israel.¹

We see that after the multiplication of the loaves, the people said: "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!" and Jesus saw that they were "about to come and take him by force to make him king" (Jn 6:14–15). They rightly interpreted His sign as a messianic sign. The problem, however, is that they didn't properly understand the sign as the type of a different kind of nourishment—spiritual nourishment.

On the following day the crowds were looking for Him, and Jesus immediately says that they are seeking Him for the wrong reason. They were looking for a free lunch with abundance: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal" (Jn 6:26–27).

Four themes are intrinsically tied up with the Bread of Life: Jesus' identity from above, His messianic mission of giving eternal and divine life, Christ's Body and Blood as the medicine of immortality, and the necessity of faith to receive the other three.

All four come together in this verse. First we see one of the main themes of the Bread of Life discourse: the contrast between physical and spiritual nourishment. The people are expecting messianic feeding so that they won't have to work, but Jesus comes to give something infinitely better. Hence He says: "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life."

Secondly, Jesus promises that He will give food of eternal life, and third, His mysterious identity is indicated in saying that the Father has set His seal on Him. Finally, it is implied that they must believe in Him to receive the life that He wishes to give them. The necessity of faith comes to the fore in Jn 6:28–29. They people asked Him: "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus's answer to them is faith in Him on account of His being sent from the Father, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

At this point the crowd asks for a sign like the manna, so that they can believe in Him. This is a teacher's dream. If you want to teach something, the best way is to have the students ask precisely what you want to teach. This question provided a perfect opening for the teaching on the Eucharist that He was about to give. The crowd says: "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (Jn 6:31). He responds:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Lord, give us this bread always." (Jn 6:32–34)

We can see that the crowd is still thinking of the bread that Jesus would give them in too material a sense. The dialogue is parallel to what happens in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman in John 3 and 4. In both cases, Jesus is speaking to them about a spiritual birth and a spiritual water, but He is understood at first as referring to carnal birth and drink. The crowd in Capernaum, like the Samaritan woman in John 4:15, apparently asks for Christ's gift to save themselves from toil. Jesus goes on to explain what the bread from heaven is that He is promising them: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (Jn 6:35).

In the desert Israel was fed by a bread, which, although mysterious, was merely a created reality whose purpose was to nourish the body. The manna was far lower in the scale of being than man himself. God fed the Israelites

¹ See Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2011), 77–115; *Jesus and the Last Supper* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing, 2015).

with something infinitely different from Himself. The new bread from heaven that Jesus is promising, although prefigured by the manna, is therefore something utterly different in kind. Jesus proposes to feed His disciples with His own life from above. This nourishment differs, furthermore, from physical nourishment in that the latter is always insufficient. No matter how much we have eaten in the past, we still need to eat tomorrow and hunger is never definitively satisfied. No finite gift, no matter how great, can actually satisfy the human will such that we will never desire anything else. In saying that He will satisfy us such that we will never hunger or thirst for more, Jesus is making an implicit divine claim. Only union with God can fully satisfy our hunger, for God has made us for Himself. Jesus therefore, is promising that He will feed us with Himself, and that this will completely fill our restless heart as only God can.

There is also a divine claim in the fact that He is presenting Himself as coming down from heaven, implying that He has pre-existed in heaven, prior to His conception and birth as man. Christ comes from heaven not physically, but through the supreme mystery of the hypostatic union by which the Word of God, pre-existing from eternity, “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). “No man has ascended into heaven, but he that descended from heaven” (Jn 3:15). This Body continues to come to us “from heaven” through transubstantiation, by which He who sits now in heaven at the right hand of the Father is truly and substantially present in the Eucharist under the appearances of bread and wine.

Up to this point, however, one could think that Jesus was speaking of Himself as the bread of life in a purely figurative and symbolic sense, as a metaphor for His mysterious divine identity. He proceeds to clarify that He is the “bread from heaven” and the “bread of life” not only in that He is from above, but in that He has become man so that He could nourish us with His own divine and eternal life, and so give us a share in that life that is incompatible with death, raising us up on the last day:

This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. (Jn 6:39-40)

Once again there is an implicit divine claim, for no one can give what they do not possess. If Jesus promises to eternal life, it can only because He possesses that life that He promises. The crowd thus murmurs about this claim: “How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (Jn 6:42).

Jesus responds to the murmuring speaking about His identity from the Father and His immediate knowledge of the Father: “Not that any one has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father” (Jn 6:46).

In other words, Jesus should be believed here because He speaks not by hearsay, but through vision; He has seen the Father. In other words, He possesses the beatific vision which is the very life of heaven. Jesus then insists still more on the power of the bread of life to give eternal life:

“I am the bread of life. 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 any one eats of this bread, he will live forever.” (Jn 6)

Jesus here presents Himself as the bread of life such that reception of this bread will have the same effect as the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, access to which was lost with original sin. Jesus is thus presenting the manna of the New Covenant as a “medicine of immortality,” a restoration of the original blessed state in which our first parents were created. In other words, Jesus is promising a return to the beginning. This return is an eschatological restoration, spoken of by the prophets in various texts. In Isaiah 25:6-8, God says:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth.

The disciples might also have thought of the prophecy of Ezekiel 37 about the dead bones of the house of Israel. In Ez 37:12-14, God promises:

Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.

After promising that those who receive Jesus as the bread of life, Jesus goes one step further, and connects this bread of life with His own flesh: “the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6:51). This verse is doubly shocking, for it contains first the proclamation that He will give His life in sacrifice for the salvation of the world, and then states this very life given for the life of the world will be communicated to His disciples by giving us His flesh to receive. In other words, Jesus is presenting Himself as a kind of Peace offering that is offered to God in sacrifice, and then is received to be consumed by those who offer the sacrifice. The difference, of course, is that no animal sacrifice of Israel was given for the “life of the world.”

Not surprisingly, the murmuring of the crowd takes on a new focus after this verse, asking, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

If Jesus meant to speak in a purely figurative manner, this would have been the occasion to clarify. Instead, He emphasizes still more the literal realism of His words, explaining that His very flesh will be given to us to consume as “living bread”:

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; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me.”²

In John 6:54, Jesus introduces a different verb for eating which emphasizes the physical chewing or gnawing: τρώγω.³ At the same time He also heightens the realism and shock of this consumption by adding the drinking of His blood, which would have seemed especially abhorrent to His listeners.

Even rationalist scholars recognize the implications of this verb in 6:54. Rudolf Bultmann writes:

The offence is heightened in v. 54 by the substitution of the stronger *trogein* for *phagein*. It is a matter of real eating and not simply of some sort of spiritual participation. Thus there is every indication that v. 55 should also be taken in this way. It is really so! Jesus’ flesh is real food and his blood is real drink!⁴

Imagine how disturbing this teaching must have been to people who had never heard of the sacrament of the Eucharist! Only after the Last Supper could the Apostles understand that Christ was giving His Body and His Blood to them to be consumed under the Eucharistic species of bread and wine.

It is no surprise that John then tells us that many of His disciples found Christ’s teaching to be a “hard saying” and left Him. Surprisingly, however, Jesus let them leave. This was the opportunity for clarification, as He had done with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. If the disciples who found it a hard saying were misinterpreting Him, He should have clarified that He did not really mean that they were to eat His flesh and drink His blood.

Instead He says: “Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before? It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail. The words which I have spoken to you are Spirit and life” (John 6:62-63).

Some interpreters, especially in the Protestant tradition, see these words as retreating from the realism of the previous verses. In reality, however, He is emphasizing that He is speaking about a bread of life infinitely higher than the manna in the desert. This is a bread of life that gives eternal life from the Spirit. Once again, one cannot give what one does not possess. Jesus here is identifying Himself as the one who gives the Spirit, and who is able to give life through the Spirit. His future ascension is put forward as a sign that He can send the Spirit and give the life of the eschatological Kingdom. John 6:63 also reinforces the parallel with the prophecy of Ezekiel 37, in which it is the Spirit who will breathe on the dead bones of Israel and raise them up. Jesus is claiming to realize Israel’s eschatological hope through words of Spirit and life.

John 6:63 is perfectly compatible with John 6:54. It is through physically consuming the flesh of the Son of man, made present through the power of the Spirit in the Eucharist, that His divine life is communicated to us, again through the power of the Spirit.

Finally Jesus asks the Apostles if they also would leave Him. This highlights once again the theme of faith in Christ’s words, as Peter answers: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Summary

Christ wished to give us a share in His divine life of glory. What better way to accomplish this than to nourish us with His very Body and Blood, thus communicating to us a frequent increase in sanctifying grace (as long as we do not reject it through mortal sin). Because it is a sacrament of spiritual nourishment, Christ allows the appearances of bread and wine to continue after transubstantiation has been realized, so that in these forms compatible with human nature we can be spiritually nourished in the divine life and progressively united to it.

In this discourse, Jesus indicates that the manna that fed the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years was a figure of the spiritual nourishment He would give the world through the sacrament of His Body and Blood. Furthermore, He clearly states that the type falls immeasurably short of the Antitype, which is the Eucharist. Only the Eucharist is the “true bread from heaven.” The type was a great sign, for it was literally bread that came physically down from heaven like dew to give bodily nourishment to the Israelites in their pilgrimage in the desert. Christ’s Body and Blood is spiritual bread and drink — being Christ Himself, true God and true man — that nourishes the faithful not physically, but in sanctifying grace and charity, by which we gain access to eternal life. Hence in John 6:63, Jesus says, “It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail. The words which I have spoken to you are Spirit and

² Jn 6:53–57.

³ C. Spicq, “Trogein. Est-il synonyme de phagein et d’esthiein dans le Nouveau Testament?” *New Testament Studies* 26 (1979–1980): 414–419; *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., revised by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), “τρώγω,” p. 1019.

⁴ Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 236. Quoted in Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 210.

life.” The Eucharist communicates to those who worthily receive it, the life not of the body but of the Spirit.⁵

As mentioned above, the bread of life discourse also contains a reference to the sacrificial aspect of the Mass in John 6:51: “The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” For Jesus to give His flesh for the life of the world implies the sacrifice of His life for the redemption of the world. Christ’s sacrificial death “for the life of the world” is the precondition for giving us His flesh in Holy Communion.⁶

⁵ See Thomas J. Nash, *Worthy Is the Lamb: The Biblical Roots of the Mass* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 136–137: “I also suggest that Jesus is imply saying that his flesh, that is his human nature *by itself*, has no power to give life, eternal or otherwise. However, when united to his divine Person by the Holy Spirit at his Incarnation . . . it becomes a participant in wondrous divine blessing. St. Cyril of Alexandria argues similarly, equating ‘the spirit that quickeneth’ with Christ’s divinity, and ‘the flesh that profiteth nothing’ with Christ’s mere human nature on its own.”

⁶ See CCC 1355: “In the communion, preceded by the Lord’s prayer and the breaking of the bread, the faithful receive ‘the bread of heaven’ and ‘the cup of salvation,’ the body and blood of Christ who offered himself ‘for the life of the world’ (Jn 6:51); CCC 1382: “To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us.” See also Thomas J. Nash, *Worthy Is the Lamb*, 134–135.

