

The eucharistic nature of John's Bread of Life discourse

Jesus did not lie about eating his flesh and drinking his blood

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Introduction

An initial reading of John 6:22-71 leaves the impression that through the living bread discourse, Jesus taught his disciples to eat his flesh and drink his blood in the Lord's Supper. This is not only the interpretation of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodoxⁱ churches, but also that of orthodox theologians immediately following the time of the apostles and by some confessional Lutheran theologians today. (Except when explicitly indicating metaphorical, non-physical eating and drinking, the words *eat* and *drink* will be used in the plain, oral sense, as Jesus meant them when he said, "Take, eat" and "Take, drink.") This view will be vindicated by establishing these two teachings from the straightforward reading of the passage:

1. John 6:51-58 speaks of the eating and drinking commanded in the words of the institutionⁱⁱ of the Lord's Supper, as opposed to merely metaphorical, non-physical eating and drinking.
2. In this passage, the objects of eating and drinking, referred to as "true food" and "true drink," are the literal body and blood of Jesus, not merely the sacramental symbols or spiritual benefits of his flesh and blood.

If both of these premises are true, then it necessarily follows that communicants orally partake of the literal flesh and blood of Jesus by eating and drinking the consecrated bread and wine. As the first proposition remains controversial in traditional Protestant circles, it will receive much more attention here. The second proposition will be treated in passing since few would question it after close examination of the passage.

ⁱ "In contradistinction to the neo-Platonic spiritualism of Origen and Augustine, the Eastern church has retained the realism of Ignatius and the Orthodox Fathers." ¹, p. 144

ⁱⁱ Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25.

The “living bread” is the flesh given as a sacrifice

The living bread discourse

This brief summary of the narrative that contains the living bread discourse brings out the details most relevant to the thesis of this essay. The day after Jesus walked on the waterⁱⁱⁱ to join the twelve apostles, the people searched for Jesus until they found him (John 6:15-25). Noting that they looked for him only because they wanted him to again give them bread that perishes, Jesus told them to instead seek by faith in him the eternal food that he would provide for them in the future (vv. 26-29).^{iv} He said that his Father, unlike Moses, gave true bread from heaven, and that Jesus himself was the bread given for the life of the world (vv. 30-35). He reproved their unbelief, and said that all who believe in him will be raised at the last day (vv. 36-40). In response to the Jews’ questioning how one with known earthly parents could be the bread from heaven, Jesus reaffirmed that those who believe in him have eternal life and proclaimed that he is the living bread from heaven, promising that anyone who eats it will live forever (vv. 41-51). He then added that the bread that he would give in the future for the life of the world was his flesh (v. 51),^{2, pp. 13-18} at which point the Jews angrily asked each other how he could give his flesh to eat (v. 52). Jesus responded that they would have no life unless they ate his flesh and drank his blood (v. 53). He went on to explain that whoever ate his flesh and drank his blood had eternal life, would be raised at the last day, and remained in him (vv. 54, 56) since his flesh was true food and his blood was true drink (v. 55). Just as Jesus lived by the living Father, those who consumed Jesus would live by him (v. 57). After reiterating that he is the bread from heaven that imparts eternal life to whoever eats it, many of his disciples complained about how hard his teaching was (vv. 58-60). Jesus addressed their complaints by predicting his ascension and by rebuking their materialism and unbelief (vv. 61-65). At that point, many of his disciples left him, never to walk with him again, but the twelve apostles reaffirmed their faith in his divinity, confessing that they had nowhere else to go for the words of eternal life (vv. 66-69). The narrative ends with Jesus’ prediction of his betrayal by one of them (vv. 70-71).

Symbolism in the living bread discourse

Without controversy, Jesus painted an image of living bread as a symbol of his body. It has been argued that since the living bread is a symbol, the passage cannot promote the oral eating of his flesh. The symbolism of the passage will be examined in more detail to make it clear that the text lends no support to that conclusion.

On the meaning behind the symbol of eating living bread, the two explanations given by conservative commentators may be conveniently labeled as *the non-eucharistic interpretation* and *the eucharistic interpretation*. The former holds that eating living bread means either believing in^v or appropriating the benefits of^{vi} the flesh of Jesus given as a sacrifice on the cross,

ⁱⁱⁱ “Even the walking on the sea has been understood [by the Ancient Church] as pointing to the divine-human mystery of the body of Jesus.”^{1, p. 144}

^{iv} This is the Johannine equivalent of the exhortation to seek the kingdom rather than the things of this age (Matthew 6:33; Luke 12:31).

^v As, e.g., per Martin Luther and Charles Hodge.

whereas the latter holds that eating living bread means orally eating the flesh of Jesus not only given as a sacrifice on the cross, but also mysteriously given as food in the Lord's Supper. As the following tables clarify, both interpretations agree that the living bread symbolizes the flesh of Jesus to be given, but they disagree on the meaning of the symbolic eating.

NON-EUCHARISTIC INTERPRETATION	Action	Object
Symbol	Eat	Bread
Meaning	Believe in Appropriate the benefits of	His flesh (to be given)

EUCHARISTIC INTERPRETATION	Action	Object
Symbol	Eat	Bread
Meaning	Eat	His flesh (to be given)

Some Lutheran scholars hold that John intended both interpretations, and this paper argues in favor of the eucharistic interpretation without taking a position on whether or not it is compatible in some sense with the non-eucharistic interpretation.^{vii} Those exclusively maintaining the non-eucharistic interpretation see no reference to the Lord's Supper in the living bread discourse since they hold that eating in the passage means nothing more than believing in or appropriating the benefits of the sacrificed flesh of Jesus. The next two sections attempt to demonstrate that the discourse does refer to the Lord's Supper, regardless of whether eating in the discourse includes the meaning of believing or appropriating in addition to actual eating.

Comparisons with other symbols in the gospel account do not lend decisive support to either interpretation. For example, the image of living water (John 4; 7:37) seems to support the non-eucharistic interpretation, whereas the image of the sacrificial lamb (John 1:29) seems to support the eucharistic interpretation. A non-eucharistic interpreter could argue that since the Spirit, unlike the symbolic water, is not drunk, Jesus' flesh, unlike the symbolic bread, is not eaten. It could be countered that Jesus, like the symbolic lamb, *was* sacrificed. In the case of the

^{vi} As, e.g., per John Calvin.

^{vii} If John 6:35 gives the non-eucharistic meaning to the symbol of eating, then the additional eucharistic meaning, that of orally eating his flesh, would exhibit *double entendre*, a literary device commonly used in John (e.g., 11:48-52; 12:32-33; 18:8-9; 19:15; Blomberg³, p. 102 cites 2:4; 7:6; 12:23; a Calvinistic study Bible⁴, p. 1657 cites 3:14; 6:62; Voelz⁵ cites 1:5). (A double entendre, or double meaning, tends to be less language-dependent than a *pun*, the use of a similarity in words' sounds for humor.) Bischof argued that Johannine usage supports attaching different meanings to 6:35 and 6:51.² However, a harmonization between the eucharistic and non-eucharistic meanings may be somewhat artificial: "If in the first part of the discourse Jesus calls himself the bread of life, while in verse 51b he speaks of his flesh and blood, it is neither necessary nor possible to harmonize this... The discourses of Jesus, as John has transmitted them to us, are not logically-constructed speeches, like those of Cicero."¹, p. 144

former, but not in the case of the latter, the action changes when going from the symbol to its meaning:

	Living water	Lamb of God	Living bread
Symbol	Water to be drunk	Lamb to be sacrificed	Bread to be eaten
Meaning with unchanged action	N/A	Jesus to be sacrificed	Flesh to be eaten
Meaning with changed action	Spirit to be received	N/A	Flesh to be believed

The eucharistic interpretation might gain some support from the observation that Jesus spoke not only of eating symbolic bread, but also of eating his flesh. The non-eucharistic interpreter has as a counterexample the way Paul spoke of symbolically drinking the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Rationale for the eucharistic interpretation

Each of two main considerations lends much more compelling support to the eucharistic interpretation:

1. The wording in a key sentence of the living bread discourse so closely corresponds to the words of institution that the discourse must refer in some way to the Lord's Supper.
2. Jesus reinforced the interpretation of his words as teaching an oral consumption of his body and blood, and he later clarified that this consumption takes place in the Lord's Supper.

A subsection is devoted to elaborating each consideration.

1. "This living bread is my body, given for the world" (paraphrased)

Jesus' command to eat his flesh and drink his blood immediately brings the Holy Supper to mind, not only for ancient orthodox believers and for Roman Catholics, but even for those Protestants who must remind themselves that the passage refers only to what the sacrament represents rather than to the sacrament itself. "The instructed Christian reader cannot miss the reference to the sacrament of the Eucharist."^{6, p. 338} As Voelz explains,

...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, [an] eating which occurs in the case of all communicants, while at the same time they point beyond the oral eating to the spiritual eating, an eating which occurs only in the case of believers when one believes the proclaimed Gospel or receives by faith the blessings of Holy Baptism or of the Holy Supper.^{5, emphasis original}

This initial impression that the passage refers to the Lord's Supper is confirmed by any study thorough enough to include a careful comparison with the words by which Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper:

The fact that in John 6.51c-58 traditional eucharistic material has been used is confirmed by an observation made by J. H. Bernard in 1928. He recognized *that we have in John 6.51c an independent version of Jesus' word of interpretation over the bread*. One needs only to set John 6.51c and 1 Cor. 11.24b side by side to be convinced of the correctness of this insight:

<i>John 6.51c</i>	<i>1 Cor. 11.24b</i>
the bread which I give	this
is my flesh	is my body
for the life of the world	which is for you

It can be seen that the structure and content of the sentence is the same in both cases.^{7, pp. 107-108}

(That John's word *flesh* appears instead of Paul's word *body* in no way detracts from this observation.^{viii}) John's original audience, like second-century believers, would have noticed this eucharistic reference in John 6:51c since weekly celebration of the sacrament would have familiarized them with its words of institution.^{9, p. 182} Why John referred to the Lord's Supper only cryptically^{ix} cannot be known with certainty, and has little or no bearing on the meaning of the discourse on the living bread.

Assuming the historical accuracy of John's account of the gospel, Jesus' reference to the Lord's Supper must have been a prediction not fully understood before the sacrament had been instituted. Likewise, the disciples did not understand Jesus' early prediction of his resurrection until after the event (John 2:19-22).^{5, x} Since Jesus predicted the Eucharist by the words, "the bread [of the Supper] that I will give... is my flesh... whoever feeds [in the Supper] on my

^{viii} There are two plausible explanations for John's use of *flesh* in place of *body*, as occurs in the words of institution:

1. Docetists had already been using the word *body* in a spiritualized sense, so that in combating their heresy, John, and Ignatius after him, substituted the word *flesh* for the sake of clarity.^{1, p. 292; 2, pp. 57-67}
2. The word *flesh* in John's tradition of the words of institution, shared by Ignatius and Justin Martyr, is a literal translation of the original Hebrew or Aramaic spoken by Jesus, whereas the word *body* in the Pauline/Synoptic tradition is "the idiomatic Greek translation," according to Jeremias.^{7, p. 199} In his own exposition of the words institution (pp. 218-237), he did not make use of John 6:53-58, even though he did regard that passage as a genuine Johannine exposition of those words (pp. 107-108).

Each explanation relies in part on the statement of Ignatius (c. 110 A.D.) that the early docetists "abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, Flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in His goodness, raised up again" (Letter to the Smyrnaeans 7:1).^{8, p. 25}

^{ix} Apparently, John wanted to teach the Christian community about the Lord's Supper without the awareness of those outside the community. Some suggested reasons for John's wanting to hide eucharistic references from unbelievers include the following:

1. John wrote primarily for a non-Christian audience that would have been confused by explicit references to a ceremony practiced only by those initiated into the Christian community.^{6, pp. 338-339}
2. It has also been suggested that John believed that to tell unbelievers about the most intimate aspect of Christian worship would be to defile the sacred.
3. John wrote in such a way as to avoid persecution.^{1, p. 144}

It is likewise believed that the phrase "water and the Spirit" (John 3:5) cryptically refers to baptism.^{1, p. 144}

^x As the disciples did not even comprehend Jesus' clear predictions of his death and resurrection before Passion Week, they could not have understood the prediction of giving bread in connection with his sacrificial death (John 6:27, 51, 60; cf. 2:19-22). Thus, they did not grasp the meaning of that prediction until they heard the words of institution.

flesh...,” since John did not use the words *flesh* and *blood* in a spiritualized sense,^{xi} and since the offer “Take, eat” refers to orally eating the predicted bread, it necessarily follows that Jesus invites the oral reception of his flesh and blood.

It will be seen that the verses following John 6:51c lead to the same conclusion.

2. Did Jesus confirm a misunderstanding of his words?

The Jews were not offended at Jesus’ saying that he would give himself up in death, but at his saying that his flesh is the living bread he had said they must eat. Thus, they did not understand him to teach that his giving them living bread was merely giving his life as a sacrifice. In fact, the interpretation that the bread symbolizes the sacrificial Victim without reference to his resurrection^{xiii} is untenable since the eternally living bread (flesh) is portrayed as conveying its own life, just as the living Father conveys his own life to the Son, and as the living Son conveys his own life to those who believe, culminating in their resurrection through his resurrection (6:27, 51c, 57; 5:25-26; 14:19).^{xiii}

When the Jews expressed shock that Jesus would tell them to eat his flesh, Jesus endorsed their interpretation (John 6:51-53). If his audience incorrectly thought he was talking about orally eating his flesh, as commentators agree,^{xiv} would not Jesus have been deceitful to confirm their opinion? In a similar conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus, far from confirming the misunderstanding expressed, corrected it by explaining what he had said (John 3:4-8). If, in response to the Jews’ indication that they understood Jesus in a literal sense, he knowingly spoke words to them that confirmed their mistaken opinion in their minds, while in his own mind attaching a meaning to those words not discernible to them, he would have thereby intentionally deceived them, eventually leading to their eternal destruction. That particular kind of dishonesty is known in ethics by the term *equivocation*, as when a witness testifying under oath, in order to mislead the court, attaches a different meaning to his words than is understood by those hearing; this is perjury even though the words are true in a hidden sense:

Equivocation: the use of words or expressions with a double meaning different for the speaker than for the hearer. E.g. “I never received your letter”, taking *letter* in the sense of a large metal letter.¹³ [emphasis modified]

^{xi} Had the apostle thought that only spiritual flesh and spiritual blood were sacrificed for the world, his doctrine would resemble the very docetic position he condemned. Again, there is no disagreement on the meaning of *flesh* and *blood* between influential representatives of the eucharistic and non-eucharistic interpretations.

^{xii} Influenced by Francis Turretin,^{10, p. 513} many confessional Presbyterians take this position.

^{xiii} This observation does not in itself prove the eucharistic interpretation: the more mystical Calvinists believe that the text teaches a real communion with the resurrected body and blood of Jesus, and that the text sheds light on the Lord’s Supper without referring to it.^{11; 12}

^{xiv} For example, while taking the exclusively non-eucharistic interpretation, the web site of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church says, “When his hearers continue to be offended, our Lord aggravates the offense - as He so often did - by speaking in terms that are more starkly offensive to them. ‘I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.’ (v. 51) They take him literally and argue, offended, over what He could mean. And so He restates it even more baldly: ‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. ... My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink....’ (vv.53-55)” (opc.org/qa.html?question_id=133).

The Westminster Larger Catechism rightly condemns equivocation as an instance of deliberate falsehood (Q. 145):

Intentionally to use expressions that can be understood in two different ways, in order to deceive some other person, is just as wicked as telling an outright lie. For example, the minister who is reported to have said, “I believe in the divinity of Christ,” and then later explained to someone else that he believed in the divinity of Christ because he believed in the divinity of all human beings, was guilty of the sin of breaking the ninth commandment.¹⁴

In fact, traditional casuistry notwithstanding,^{xv} there is no moral difference between equivocation and “outright” lying: any lie can be reinterpreted in the liar’s head to make it a true statement in some way unknown to those lied to. Although Jesus often used double meanings, whenever he did so, both meanings were true. He never spoke deceitfully, but rather he meticulously avoided all dishonesty, as seen particularly in the case of his trial before Pilate.⁶ When questioned as to whether he was a king, Jesus was careful not to merely respond affirmatively since he knew Pilate would have understood such a response as a claim to a political, earthly throne. Although the words “I am a King” could have been true without clarification in an equivocal sense, they would have deceived the one hearing them. For that reason, Jesus went on to say that his kingdom is not of this world, but that he came to bear witness to the truth (John 18:33-38). If there was no deceit in Nathanael, a true Israelite (John 1:47), how much less in the Way, the Truth, and the Life?

Although Jesus sometimes spoke obscurely in order to hide the truth, as when he spoke in parables (Matthew 13:10-15; cf. 11:25-27), he never spoke with intent to deceive. It may be objected that God, knowing that his word will be misinterpreted, does not change his word, but continues to speak it, even to the destruction of many hearers. That observation, however, does not pertain to the case of the living bread discourse: Jesus specifically addressed the grumbling of his audience, not only letting their words stand, but also taking them to an even more shocking level (John 6:43, 52-53). Further, God is not a deceiver: he never speaks in order to mislead, but the Father of Lies, the Author of Confusion, is the one who snatches the clear word of the kingdom from the hearts of those who do not understand it (Matthew 13:19). God will never deceive those who rely on his words, as Luther emphasized over and over; every article of the orthodox Christian faith depends on the absolute reliability of those words.

So far was Jesus from deceiving his hearers that he added the clarification that he was not speaking on a merely earthly level, the level on which they were thinking in their desire for earthly bread (John 6:26-27, 63). Nonetheless, when Jesus corrected their materialistic conception of his words, he did not withdraw them or back down from their straightforward meaning. The statement “the flesh is of no avail” refers not to the action of eating, but to the flesh considered as natural humanity, as man apart from the Spirit (1:12-13). The flesh to be eaten does not profit merely because it is flesh, but because, as the flesh of the living Son of God (1:14), it conveys eternal life through the Spirit. Since, according to both the non-eucharistic interpretation and the eucharistic interpretation, the meaning of “bread” is the literal flesh of the Son of God that saves only through the Spirit, both agree that the phrase “the flesh is of no avail”

^{xv} For complex historical reasons, many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians held that in some circumstances equivocation and mental reservation, but not lying, were permissible, with the implication that whether or not one should deceive in a given emergency depends in part on his or her cleverness.¹⁵

cannot possibly mean *Jesus'* flesh is of no avail;^{xvi} rather, he said *the* flesh is of no avail in the sense of flesh as flesh, flesh as opposed to Spirit, as in John 3:6. The disagreement between the two interpretations is not about what is eaten, but about whether the eating mentioned is only metaphorical, or whether it is also in some way literal. In other words, the question may be phrased this way: Is eating the living bread merely a metaphor of putting trust in the flesh of Jesus, or is it also a metaphor of orally eating that flesh in some mysterious way made possible only by the supernatural work of the Spirit? Jesus' reinforcement of the latter interpretation may be relied on with the full confidence that he does not deceive.

How Jesus wanted his disciples to consume him only became clear with the words of institution, in which Jesus conveyed, "this is how you eat my flesh: eat this bread; this is how you drink my blood: drink this wine." Attempting to interpret the living bread discourse without considering the Lord's Supper would have occurred neither to the disciples after its institution, nor to the Christian community of the first century.^{xvii} 5

Discussion

Objections against the eucharistic interpretation of the discourse

The strongest Protestant objection against the eucharistic reference of the living bread discourse is that partaking of Jesus' flesh and blood are said to be necessary (John 6:53) and sufficient (vv. 51, 54, 56-57) for eternal life. These statements are taken in an absolute sense, almost as if the Bible were a complex, modern legal document with a need to explicitly specify every condition and close every potential loophole. Those holding to the clarity of Scripture do not apply such wooden literalism to most other New Testament passages, but rather read them as ordinary language. Regarding necessity, Jesus did not make participation in the Lord's Supper absolutely necessary for eternal life for all people, but he did warn his disciples that their turning away from him on account of his hard teaching demonstrated their lack of saving faith.² pp. 43-45 Further, the living bread discourse is more concerned about abiding or remaining in Jesus than about the initial reception of eternal life (John 6:56).² pp. 45-46 As to sufficiency, many Protestants maintain that since vv. 51, 54, 56-57 specify no condition for eternal life other than eating and drinking, nothing else is necessary, a conclusion that would allegedly contradict 3:16-18 unless eating and drinking only symbolize believing. The same logic would argue that since John 20:31 makes no reference to the crucifixion or resurrection, faith in those events is not needed for eternal life, a conclusion that would contradict the good news proclaimed by Paul (Romans 10:9;

^{xvi} Not even Turretin denies that Jesus' flesh has power to save "by the merit of his sacrifice." Rather, he seems to follow Zwingli in denying that that Spirit really uses means of grace to impart life: "...his flesh orally received conduces not to salvation, since it belongs to the Spirit alone to vivify us."¹⁰ p. 513

^{xvii} "The gospels were written for liturgical use, as they were to be read at the weekly Eucharist. This is even more obvious in John's community than it was in Matthew's. The Fourth Gospel must in some sense presuppose information about Jesus which only Matthew and Mark preserve, as John does not have birth narratives and the institution of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He does, however, provide theological commentary on events known to us only through the Synoptics, so John 6 serves as a theological commentary on the Lord's Supper, as John 3 with the Nicodemus account serves as one on Baptism."⁹ pp. 179-180 The first-century worship service was incomplete without the Supper (Acts 2:42-46; 20:7-11).⁷ pp. 118-121

1 Corinthians 15:1-4). The discourse is quite clear that eating and drinking the flesh and blood of Jesus would not bring eternal life apart from faith (vv. 35-36, 40, 47), late Roman Catholic sacramentology notwithstanding.

The Johannine gospel record answers the objection that at the Last Supper the disciples could not yet have consumed the body and blood, as it had not yet been “given” for them.^{xviii} For on the same night, Jesus spoke as if his death and resurrection had already occurred (John 13:3, 31; 16:33; 17:2, 4, 13).^{xix} Likewise, in telling his disciples to eat the body given for them and to drink the blood shed for them, he told them to eat the body to be given for them and to drink the blood to be shed for them with words suited for repeated reception of the sacrament after his death and resurrection.

It might be objected that since the first congregations had access to the words of institution, but not to John’s gospel account, the correct interpretation of the former should not require the latter. Indeed, the passages containing the words of institution certainly teach the oral reception of Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament,¹⁶ unless perhaps those words must be clarified by some other passage on the Supper, but the only viable candidate for such a role would be the passage of the living bread discourse. It has been suggested that, in addition to the words of institution as we have them, Jesus might have given the apostles additional explanations,⁷ which they in turn would have taught their congregations. We, however, not having any such explanations, must rely either on the words of institution as clear in themselves, or on the gospel according to John as the clarification needed. Similarly, without the typological explanations of the New Testament, the deeper significance of many Old Testament passages would be as lost to us as they were to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:30-35). If there are no clear Scriptures that provide the needed teaching on the Lord’s Supper as well as on the other articles of the Christian faith, then Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy rightly call for infallible human interpreters. On the other hand, if the words of institution are so clear that they require no explanation,¹⁶ then the living bread discourse reinforces rather than clarifies those words.

^{xviii} The objection that the words of institution have to be metaphorical because they refer to Christ’s body as given (past tense)^{10, p. 482} has as much force against metaphorical interpretations of the words of institution as it has against more literal interpretations: there is a sense in which the bread and wine could not have symbolized the body and blood *given* in death before the event, when it would have been more precise to say that they symbolize the body and blood that *will be given* in death.

^{xix} In John’s account of the gospel, during the night on which the Lord was betrayed, he often spoke from a post-resurrection standpoint.^{6, pp. 393, 397-398} He spoke proleptically even before that night, as in the discourse on the living water (John 4:23), so 6:35 need not be interpreted to mean that Jesus gave himself as food long before giving his life for the world, which would seem contrary to 6:33 (but see the above note on the double entendre). Just as drinking the living water was not possible until the Holy Spirit was given (John 4:13-14; 7:37-39), there is no indication that eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus were possible before the Last Supper.

Conclusion and application

To summarize the findings of this study, Jesus in effect said, in the context of Passover, “I will give you my sacrificed and living body to eat and my blood to drink,” soon clarifying his meaning at another Passover as he handed the communicants bread and wine: “Here are my body and blood: eat and drink.” The inescapable conclusion is that communicants eat not only bread and wine, but also the sacrificed and resurrected flesh and blood of their Savior.

Does the living bread discourse indicate *why* Jesus gives his flesh and blood as food and drink?^{xx} Those who believe the sacrament’s promise of eternal life (John 6:51, 54) therein have their assurance of salvation strengthened, as when they believe the promises offered in the proclaimed gospel and in baptism.¹⁷ True nourishment is found in union with the whole Christ, just as he found nourishment in doing the will of his Father (John 4:31-34; 6:38, 56-57).^{xxi} Jesus not only gives living bread, but he is the “true bread” that he gives (v. 32): he generously gives communicants all of himself, not just his disembodied soul or divine nature (v. 55). Likewise, Jesus not only gives eternal life, but he is the very Life that he gives: eternal life is knowing him and knowing his Father through him (John 1:14, 18; 17:3). By believing the promise of “the forgiveness of sins” made in the words of institution, communicants know the crucified and risen Son of Man through the Lord’s Supper even before they join him in their resurrected bodies (John 5:25-29).^{xxii}

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^{xx} Turretin reasoned that since oral consumption of Christ is neither absolutely necessary nor sufficient for salvation, it must be useless.^{10, p. 514} Consistency would lead to the deduction that *any* administration of the sacrament is useless unless it is either absolutely necessary or sufficient for salvation.

^{xxi} Dodd’s discussion is helpful here.^{6, p. 387}

^{xxii} The promise that Christ, in his human nature, is present in the bread and wine also reinforces other promises of his presence as man, e.g., Matthew 18:20; 28:20.¹⁸

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