

The Bread of Life

In John's Gospel, chapter 6, what was the confrontation between Jesus and the Jews all about?

The day after Jesus miraculously fed five thousand men, the Jews sought Him eagerly, but their motives were all wrong. They only cared about their bellies. Jesus claimed that He was sent by the Father from heaven to give something better, eternal life, and that they could have this life by believing in Him. "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (35). But the Jews would not believe in Him. In the face of opposition and unbelief, Jesus used bold figurative language to reiterate His claim. "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (53). Even some of His disciples were greatly offended at these words and left Jesus for good.

The Jews understood Jesus literally; doesn't that prove that the Catholic interpretation is correct?

Yes, the Jews understood Christ *literally* because they asked, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (52). However, the crux of the matter is whether or not they understood Him *correctly*. Evidently they did not. He had previously explained how to partake of the Bread of heaven, through believing in Him, but they would not. St. Augustine, the Catholic bishop, explains: "It seemed unto them hard that He said, 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, ye have no life in you:' they received it foolishly, they thought of it carnally, and imagined that the Lord would cut off parts from His body, and give unto them; and they said, 'This is a hard saying.' It was they who were hard, not the saying..." (Augustine, Psalm 99).

If, as you say, the Jews did not understand correctly, why didn't Jesus, the perfect teacher, correct them?

Jesus did not correct them because of their obstinate unbelief and hardness of heart. That is the way Jesus dealt with stubborn unbelievers. He had told them plainly who He was and what God expected them to do, but they would not listen. Entrenching themselves in unbelief, He then spoke to them in figurative language, and surely enough they thought He was speaking of actually eating His flesh.

Jesus also exposed the unbelieving hearts of the "disciples" who murmured that it was a hard saying. He rebuked them: "Does this offend you? What if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe" (61-64). Christ predicted His ascension to heaven, and by implication, He refuted their foolish idea of giving His physical body for ingestion. He explicitly states that His words should be understood spiritually rather than carnally, "The words that I speak to you are spirit." Finally, He points to the root problem: unbelief! "There are some of you who do not believe." He who knows the heart exposed the hypocrisy of these "disciples." These were not innocent and honest truth-seekers; they were hardened unbelievers. It is no wonder that Jesus let them go.

It is significant that in the same passage, the Jews misunderstood Christ at another point. Jesus claimed that He came down from the Father but the Jews could not understand -- they knew his family, or rather, they *thought* they did. "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, 'I have come down from heaven'?" (42). Again, Jesus said nothing to set them straight. He did not inform them that Joseph was not really His father, or that He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin. Jesus would not cast pearls before swine.

What is the relation between Jesus' discourse and the Eucharist?

There is an obvious similarity between the discourse in John 6 and the Eucharist. Jesus speaks of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, which is similar to eating the bread and drinking the wine at the Lord's Supper.

However, Jesus' discourse is not primarily a reference to the Eucharist, but to His sacrifice on the cross. He says, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." This expression is similar to other verses in John's gospel (3:15,16; 10:11,17,18; 12:24), all of which undoubtedly point to His death on the cross. This explains the resemblance between Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life and the Eucharist, which is a proclamation of His death. *Both are pointing to the one momentous event of our redemption, the sacrifice of the cross.*

Moreover, in John 6 the Lord Jesus underlines the necessity of feeding on Him by faith to have eternal life; similarly the Eucharist represents the communion of Believers in His body and blood. John 6 points to the spiritual reality the Lord's Supper also signifies - our participation in Christ by faith, and the benefits of His redemption, eternal life, through Him.

Eating Jesus' flesh and drinking His blood are necessary to have eternal life. How then can we partake to Jesus' flesh and blood other than the Eucharist?

Yes, it is absolutely necessary, for the Lord Jesus said: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (53,54).

Jesus clearly explained *how* we can feed on Him:

- "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who *believes* in Me shall never thirst" (35).
- "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and *believes* in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (40).
- "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who *believes* in Me has everlasting life" (47).

We feed on Christ by believing in Him! Augustine put it this way: "This is then to eat the meat, not that which perisheth, but that which endureth unto eternal life. To what purpose dost thou make ready teeth and stomach? Believe, and thou hast eaten already" (Augustine, Tractate 25).

What should our response be to Jesus' discourse?

We could either follow the Jews and the false disciples – they would not believe in the Messiah sent by God the Father from heaven. Or else we could imitate the apostles who rightly understood and obeyed Jesus' words.

When the false disciples abandoned Jesus, He challenged His apostles: "Do you also want to go away?" The apostle Peter, speaking for the rest of the apostles, answered: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (68, 69).

At least the apostles got the message! *They have eternal life who, having heard the gospel message, eat and drink by believing in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God.*