

The Lord's Supper

John 6:48-59
January 6, 2019

Before reading this transcript, it would be worth your time to read John 6:48-59. If you have time, you might want to read all of chapter 6.

Back when I was much younger, I was blessed to be part of a para-church ministry called "Short Horses." It had nothing to do with horses. But it was a good descriptor, in that we were young in our faith, more like short horses (ponies) than full-grown horses. One thing that we did not lack was passion for God and exuberance to be out doing ministry and sharing the gospel. With that youthful exuberance, came some choices that weren't always based on a well-informed theology. I can still remember being in the basement of a small country church where we were about to lead a weekend youth retreat. We were committed to consecrating ourselves before God before the weekend of ministry began. That's why we decided that it would be a good idea to spend some time in prayer, Scripture reading, and having communion together as a team. The only problem was that none of us had ever led communion. And, none of us had taken time to prepare grape juice or bread in advance. So, in a very impromptu way, we decided to use whatever we could find. Don't get me wrong, our hearts were in the right place. We were by no means intending to be sacrilegious or to treat the body/blood of Christ in a trivial way. The closest thing we could find to grape juice was a pitcher of grape Kool-Aid. Finding bread turned out to be more challenging. One well-intentioned person, suggested that maybe we should use Doritos... but that didn't seem appropriate. I can't actually remember, but I think we ended up using a piece of regular sandwich bread.¹ What I do remember, is that with genuine reverence for Christ and a real desire to draw near to His presence, we celebrated communion together on that Friday afternoon.

I don't recommend that our church starts using Kool-Aid. And I CERTAINLY don't recommend using Doritos. I think we can agree that grape juice and gluten-free bread is more appropriate. Beyond a basic agreement on the bread and juice though, churches have some varying opinions over how the Lord's Supper should be celebrated, what its significance is, and who should participate in it. We're going to talk about some of that today.

Please turn in your Bible to John 6. John 6 is a very interesting chapter to read the whole way through, all 71 verses. We won't have time today to dig into all of these verses but here's a quick overview. John 6 begins with Jesus feeding the 5,000, then Jesus walks on the water, then Jesus explains that He is the bread of life. Jesus tries to turn their attention away from actual physical bread to believing that He is the spiritual bread sent from God. The people then begin discussing the manna that God provided for His people back in the Old Testament. Jesus declares, "I am the bread of life." The people start to grumble about this, how could He make such a claim? Jesus then explains that this bread is his flesh which He will "give for the life of the world." (verse 51) And then, He declares something even more challenging in John 6:53, "Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.'"² When Jesus' disciples heard this, they said, "this is a tough teaching to accept" and many of them turned back and no longer followed Him. But, not all of them turned back. Some remained. In fact, there were 12 in particular who remained. And here's why. Despite this challenging teaching, the disciples knew that Jesus had the words of eternal life. They had come to a place where they fully believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah; they knew that He had indeed come from heaven.

Teachings like John 6 are still creating some confusion for Christ-followers today. Understandably, these texts are not very easy to decipher the first time we hear them.³ Jesus said these things in the

¹ Consider 1 Samuel 21:1-6.

² The fact "That John uses the term 'flesh' (sarx) rather than 'body' (sōma), found everywhere else in the New Testament when the Lord's supper is clearly in view, suggests (though it does not prove) that John is not making any direct reference to it." (Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 295). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.) Consider also John 1:14.

³ That seems to be part of Jesus' strategy. He wants to get our attention. He wants to see if we recognize that He does indeed have the words of life. Or, if we are just going to walk away the first time He teaches us something that we are not ready or willing to hear.

broader context of having just fed 5,000 people bread and references to Moses and Manna, so we should not assume that he was directly referring to the Lord's Supper here. However, as modern-day Christians, we can hardly NOT think of the Lord's Supper when we read these words. We'll come back to John 6, but first, let's allow it to be a springboard to get us thinking about the Lord's Supper. **Please take a look at the chart on the last page of this transcript.**

Across the top, this chart lays out 4 different viewpoints regarding the Lord's Supper: Transubstantiation, Consubstantiation, Reformed, and Memorial.⁴ You'll notice along the left-hand column that it then breaks each of these down by denominations/founders, and various questions of how, what, and who. Let's take a closer look at that 1st column, "Transubstantiation." This is what most Roman Catholic's believe. Catholic churches observe the Lord's Supper as part of their worship service every Sunday. They refer to it as the Eucharist. Their observance and beliefs differ from our church's in some pretty substantial ways. If you look in the 2nd box from the top, Catholics believe in a more literal interpretation of the "body" and "blood" of Jesus. Through consecration, they believe that the bread/wine change into Christ's actual body and blood. If you look at the 3rd box down, one significance they see in celebrating the Lord's Supper, is that they believe participating frees us from minor or accidental sins (venial⁵). Christ is sacrificed at each mass to atone for the sins of the partaker.

Our practice of the Lord's Supper at Efree Bemidji takes a nonliteral view,⁶ more in line with the Memorial view in the far-right column.⁷ Therefore, we disagree with the Catholic teaching that participating in the Lord's Supper, somehow secures a fresh transaction with God, that gains us forgiveness. Certainly, the bread and the juice are a visual reminder of God's grace but they do not, in and of themselves, invoke God's grace. This is why most Protestants tend to display an empty cross, illustrating the risen Christ and His completed one-time sacrifice for all. Catholics tend to display a crucifix, a cross with Jesus still on it, illustrating Jesus' continuing work on the cross and His ongoing sacrifice at each mass to atone for sins.⁸

If you look at the 2nd row from the top, you'll see the name Aquinas under Roman Catholic. Then, if you move to the right, you'll see the names Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. Even these 3 Protestant Reformers debated the finer nuances of just how, precisely, we commune with Christ when we celebrate the Lord's Supper.⁹ These four views do have some

Points of Agreement regarding the Lord's Supper:¹⁰

1. It was established by Jesus Himself.¹¹
2. Jesus commanded that it be celebrated by His followers.¹²
3. It proclaims our Lord's death.
4. It imparts some kind of spiritual benefit to participants.

I know that this chart probably raises more questions than it answers. But that can be a good thing. We should think CAREFULLY about what we believe and how we practice our faith. You may be thinking, "Pastor Jerry, this chart is all well and good, but how can we be sure that the Catholics

⁴ H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology & Doctrine*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1992, pp. 124-125 chart "Four Views of the Lord's Supper."
⁵ "V knee uh!"

⁶ Just like our corporate worship songs or the preaching from God's Word, when we gather together for the Lord's Supper, "it strengthens us in our faith." (*Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 168.)

⁷ Regardless of where our personal conviction might lie, it's good to remember the danger voiced by one writer: "Out of a zeal to avoid the conception that Jesus is present in some of magical way, some have sometimes gone to such extremes as to give the impression that the one place Jesus most assuredly is not to be found is the Lord's Supper. This is what one Baptist leader termed 'the doctrine of the real absence' of Jesus Christ." Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, p. 1130 as cited in a footnote on p. 179 of *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011.

⁸ Our Efree church comes from a Scandinavian heritage that used to live in a cultural setting that allowed people to participate in the Lord's Supper w/o any faith or commitment to Christ at all. Back then, "it was commonly believed that a person... was brought into a right relationship with God merely through... participating in the Lord's Supper." (*Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 168.) This is a misunderstanding we have clarified in Article 7 of our Statement of Faith: "...The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer."

⁹ See discussion AND footnotes on pp. 178-180 of *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011.

¹⁰ H. Wayne House, "Four Views of the Lord's Supper," *Charts of Christian Theology & Doctrine*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1992, pp. 124.

¹¹ The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper were not only initiated by Christ but also passed along as directives by Him for the church to practice.

¹² Frequency could be daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly. 1 Cor. 11:26 simply uses the word "whenever" with no indication of frequency.

don't have it right? You've got to admit that John 6 sure sounds like it lines up with their viewpoint on the Lord's Supper." I know that it may appear this way at first glance. However, let's go back to John 6, and let's take a closer look at a few key understandings. First of all,

1. In John 6, Jesus is calling people to BELIEVE. This is His core message, to believe that Jesus is who He says He is, who His miracles prove Him to be.¹³ Long before we get down to the end of John 6, where Jesus' teaching gets "more rigorously metaphorical," what matters most is that people come to Him and BELIEVE in Him.¹⁴ This is repeated over and over in John 6. In John 6:29, "Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.'" In John 6:35-36, "Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.'" In John 6:40 Jesus says, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." In John 6:47 Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life." In fact, this is how the chapter culminates at the end. In John 6:69 the 12 declare, "We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." In John 6, Jesus is calling people to BELIEVE. A 2nd key understanding is that...

2. John 6 is not focused on the Lord's Supper.¹⁵ The ordinance of the Lord's Supper hasn't even been established yet. That happens at the very end of Jesus' earthly ministry, NOT in the middle. It would make no sense for Jesus to begin to teach on it here.¹⁶ It would just be odd, if Jesus "meant to refer to something that could be understood only later."¹⁷ In John 6:54 Jesus says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." "if [verse 54's] primary reference is to the [the Lord's Supper, then] we must conclude that the one thing necessary to eternal life is participation at the Lord's table."¹⁸ If we read this verse through the lens of partaking in the Lord's Supper, it sounds an awful lot like partaking of the Lord's Supper is HOW we secure our entrance into heaven.¹⁹ There is a great danger of heretical teaching here. Verse 54 is 1 of 3 things: it's a call to cannibalism, it's a way of getting to heaven without faith in Jesus, or it's something else. We know better don't we?²⁰

The key to understanding verse 54 is to contrast it with verse 40. "Verses 54 and 40 are closely parallel: [V. 54 says] 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day'; [V. 40 says] '... everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day' ...

The conclusion is obvious: [v. 54] is the metaphorical way of referring to [v. 40]."²¹ In other words, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood" is figurative for "everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him." This goes right along with our previous point. In John 6, Jesus is calling people to BELIEVE. The Bible teaches that eternal life is found "by grace through faith," NOT by taking communion.²² What we have here in John 6, is Jesus using a hyperbolic and vivid metaphor to drive His point home. This leads us right into to our 3rd key understanding...

¹³ Jesus is the Lamb of God. This is one of the key ways that we understand Jesus. John 1:29 teaches us that He is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

¹⁴ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 288–289). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans. "This crowd has witnessed the divine revealer at work, but only their curiosity, appetites and political ambitions have been aroused, not their faith." p. 290.

¹⁵ "In short, John 6 does not directly speak of the eucharist; it does expose the true meaning of the Lord's supper as clearly as any passage in Scripture." (Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 298). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.)

¹⁶ "Moreover, if the Evangelist's intent is to provide Sacramentarian theology, the language of John 6 misses several fine opportunities to echo the institution of the Lord's supper." See also further discussion by Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 278). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁷ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 278). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁸ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 297). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁹ "What is promised to the person who eats Jesus' flesh and drinks his blood is eternal life and resurrection at the last day (6:54), and such things are elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel promised to those who believe in the Son, or receive him. It begins to sound as if the language should be taken metaphorically, not sacramentally (in the most theologically 'loaded' sense of 'sacrament')." Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 278). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

²⁰ To be fair, even the early disciples were confused about this. See John 2:19-22 and 20:9)

²¹ We need to "understand these verses as a repetition of the earlier truth, but now in metaphorical form." Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 297). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

²² This makes me flashback to a time in church history when indulgences were sold.

3. In John 6, Jesus is being metaphorical. One commentator points out, “we are more familiar with this kind of ‘eating’ metaphor than we may realize: we devour books, ...swallow stories, ...chew over a matter, and eat our own words. Doting grandparents declare they could eat up their grandchildren.”²³ Therefore, we can conclude that “Eating the flesh of the Son of Man is a striking, metaphorical way of saying that **the gift of God’s real ‘bread of life’ ...is [taken in] by [believing].**”²⁴ As we consider our chart on the 4 viewpoints of the Lord’s Supper, we can be confident that a nonliteral interpretation of the body/blood is preferable.²⁵ Jesus invites us to partake of the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of Him. Reminding ourselves of how much He loves us and that He was willing to sacrifice His own body and blood on the cross.

This demonstration of God’s love is indeed something for us to celebrate!²⁶

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji on January 6, 2019 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

The Lord's Supper: 4 Viewpoints (This is a general overview. Each local church may make particular exceptions to these general practices.)

	<u>Transubstantiation</u>	<u>Consubstantiation</u>	<u>Reformed</u>	<u>Memorial</u>
Denomination(s) and "Founder"	Roman Catholic, Thomas Aquinas	Lutheran, Martin Luther	Presbyterian and other Reformed Churches, John Calvin	Baptist, Mennonite, etc., Ulrich Zwingli
How should the "body" and "blood" be understood?	Literal interpretation. Through consecration the elements (bread/wine) change into Christ's actual body and blood. Christ is truly and substantially present in the elements themselves.	Literal interpretation. The elements do not change into the presence of Christ, but He is actually present "in, with, and under" the elements.	Nonliteral interpretation. Christ is not literally present in the elements but He is present spiritually in the elements.	Nonliteral interpretation. Christ is not present in the elements themselves either literally or spiritually.
What is the significance of the Lord's Supper?	Spiritual food to strengthen our souls and to free us from minor or accidental sins (venial). Christ is sacrificed at each mass to atone for the sins of the partaker.	Recipient has the forgiveness of their sins and the confirmation of their faith. When participation includes faith the sacrament conveys gracious benefits.	A commemoration of Christ's death that bestows grace to seal partakers in the love of Christ. It gives spiritual nourishment and brings us closer to the presence of Christ.	A commemoration of Christ's death. We are reminded of the benefits of redemption and salvation that Christ's death has purchased for us.
Who should administer the Lord's Supper?	A Priest	An Ordained Minister	A Pastor or Church Leader	A Pastor or Church Leader
Who can participate in the Lord's Supper?	Bread to baptized church members, many parishes allow only priests to have the wine.	Believers only.	Believers only.	Believers only. (Some limit it to members of the denomination, some limit it to local church members.)

See "Four Views on the Lord's Supper" pp. 124-125 *Charts of Christian Theology Doctrine*, H. Wayne House, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1992. Per Gratis Use guidelines and less than 250 words from a single source.

²³ G. R. Beasley-Murray, John (WBC 36; Word Books, 1987) referenced in Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 279). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

²⁴ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 279). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

²⁵ Even in the midst of sharing this metaphor, Jesus clarifies in John 6:63, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing..."

²⁶ See Romans 5:8.