

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Are We Called to Literally Eat Christ's Flesh and Drink His Blood?

Scripture: John 6:53–56

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In the lead-up to the Truth Matters conference in October, we will be focusing our attention on the sufficiency, authority, and clarity of Scripture. Of our previous blog series, none better embodies that emphasis than Frequently Abused Verses. The following entry from that series originally appeared on February 12, 2016. -ed.

All over the world, on any given day of the week, Jesus Christ's body is repeatedly sacrificed. According to the Roman Catholic Church, that's what happens every time they celebrate the Mass—their version of Communion, or the Lord's Table.

In *The Faith of Millions*—a book certified by the Roman Catholic Church to be “free of doctrinal and moral error”—Catholic priest John O'Brien explains what happens during the Mass:

When the priest pronounces the tremendous words of consecration, he reaches up into the heavens, brings Christ down from His throne, and places Him upon our altar to be offered up again as the Victim for the sins of man. It is a power greater than that of monarchs and emperors: it is greater than that of saints and angels, greater than that of Seraphim and Cherubim. Indeed it is greater even than the power of the Virgin Mary. While the Blessed Virgin was the human agency by which Christ became incarnate a single time, the priest brings Christ down from heaven, and renders Him present on our altar as the eternal Victim for the sins of man—not once but a thousand times! The priest speaks and lo! Christ, the eternal and omnipotent God, bows His head in humble obedience to the priest's command. [1] Rev. John A. O'Brien, *The Faith of Millions*, revised ed. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1974) 255–56.

The supposed ability to wield such supernatural power over almighty God is one of the priesthood's most blasphemous acts. As O'Brien describes it, the priestly office is a position of immense, even ultimate power, as the priest yanks Christ out of His eternal kingdom and hurls Him once again onto the sacrificial altar.

The repeated sacrificial process is called transubstantiation, wherein the bread and wine transform into the literal body and blood of Christ. It may sound cannibalistic and creepy, but they argue that it's what the Bible actually teaches:

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 yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. (John 6:53–56)

But is that really what Jesus meant by those graphic words? Was He truly prescribing the repeated and violent sacrifice of His physical body? Is that what Christ intended when He instituted Communion?

The simple answer is, No.

Linking Christ's discourse in John 6 with the Lord's Table is a significant leap. The events described in John 6 took place during His ministry in Galilee—it would be roughly a year before He and His disciples would meet in the Upper Room.

And even then, there are significant flaws with the Catholic interpretation. Apologist James McCarthy makes a salient point regarding Jesus' physical body and the institution of the Lord's Table. He notes that when Jesus referred to the bread, saying "This is my body" (Matthew 26:26), He was *physically present* with the disciples. McCarthy rightly observes: "Surely they would not have thought that Jesus' body was both *at* the table and *on* the table." [2] James G. McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995) 135–36.

In his commentary on John's gospel, John MacArthur compellingly refutes any connection between Jesus' words in John 6:53–56 and the celebration of the Lord's Table:

It should be noted that the Roman Catholic Church appeals to this passage as a proof of the doctrine of transubstantiation—the false teaching that the body and blood of Christ are literally present in the bread and wine of the Mass. Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott writes, "The body and the blood of Christ together with His soul and His divinity and therefore the whole Christ are truly present in the Eucharist" (*Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* [St. Louis: B. Herder, 1954], 382). It is a false foundation for a false doctrine, however, to suggest that Jesus was referring to the Eucharist (Communion or the Lord's Table) here, since He used the word *sarx* (flesh). A different word, *sōma* ("body"), appears in the passages referring to Communion (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:24, 27). Two additional considerations reinforce the fact that this passage does not refer to Communion: First, the Lord's Table had not yet been instituted; therefore, the Jews would not have understood what Jesus was talking about if He were speaking of Communion. Second, Jesus said that anyone who partakes of His flesh has eternal life. If that was a reference to the Lord's Table, it would mean that eternal life could be gained through taking Communion. That is clearly foreign to Scripture, however, which teaches that Communion is for those who are already believers (1 Corinthians 11:27–32) and that salvation is by faith alone (Ephesians 2:8–9). [3] John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 1–11* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006) 259–60.

And the disconnect between Scripture and the Catholic Mass runs far deeper than the nature of the elements. The author of Hebrews repeatedly states that Christ's atoning sacrifice was a "once for all" event never to be repeated:

By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. (Hebrews 10:10–14)

There is simply no way to harmonize the idea of Christ being repeatedly sacrificed when the New Testament clearly spells out the singularity and sufficiency of Christ's perfect atoning sacrifice.

What's clear is that no amount of contorting Scripture will create any endorsement of the Roman Catholic Mass. From every angle, it is biblically indefensible.

But that doesn't give us an answer for what Jesus actually meant in John 6:53-56 regarding eating His flesh and drinking His blood. As with most interpretive challenges in Scripture, clarity is found in the surrounding context. And in this case, Christ's statement makes a lot more sense when you read the whole chapter.

John 6 begins with Christ's feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1–14). That miracle immediately won Him enormous popularity in a place where food was hard to come by. Jesus, knowing His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36), had to go into isolation to avoid the masses from installing Him as king in Herod's place (John 6:15). Instead of capitalizing on His popularity and ability to draw a large crowd, Jesus saw it as a hindrance to His larger mission.

But a free lunch is nothing to be sneezed at, especially among the poor, so the crowds continued to pursue Christ with hopes of more bounty. Jesus was acutely aware of their superficial faith and told them, "You seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life" (John 6:26–27).

A lengthy dialogue then followed where Jesus continually urged the crowds to move beyond their temporal hunger and seek eternal sustenance. But His audience relentlessly pled with Him to prove His messiahship through a sign that involved food—hinting at the manna God provided the Israelites when they were wandering in the wilderness (John 6:31).

Jesus contrasted that perishable "bread out of heaven" (John 6:31–32) with Himself, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst" (John 6:35). In His immense patience with their unbelief, the Lord repeated that same point in an increasingly explicit manner:

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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. (John 6:48–51)

Jesus' audience remained oblivious to what He was really talking about. That's why He chose such provocative language as His discourse drew to a close. Dr. James White facetiously refers to Christ's severe terminology and ghastly imagery in John 6:53-56 as "the beginning of the church *shrinkage* movement." And with good reason; after Jesus spoke those words many of His disciples abandoned Him (John 6:66).

Their departure was by design. The Lord was determined to drive away followers who were nothing more than shallow hangers-on. Instead of capitalizing on His popularity, He saw it as a hindrance to His mission.

His message was clear: Temporal bread would only sustain them temporarily. They needed to eat

eternal bread—flesh and blood—to live eternally. John MacArthur explains the significance of Christ's metaphor in his sermon, [I Am the Bread of Life](#):

If you want eternal life, eating is necessary. . . . You can't just come and admire. You have to eat, which is to believe fully. But eating is in response to hunger. So, the people who eat are the people who are what? Hungry! What is hunger? It's the aching of the heart of one who knows he's empty. That's the work of the Holy Spirit to make the heart hungry. That's where the Father starts to draw. The hungry heart sees the bread. . . .

Eating is personal. It's not a group event. You can all go out to dinner, but the food has to go in *your* mouth. Lots of people can do lots of things for you. They can come over and change the curtains, fix the room. People can do a lot of things to help you. *You* have to eat. You can't do that by proxy. Eating is necessary. Eating is in response to hunger. Eating is personal and eating is transformational. If you don't eat physically, you will die. If you eat, the food you take in transforms you, and that's what Christ does.

The simple truth is our physical food cannot change our eternal destiny—not even the gruesome rituals of the Catholic Mass. Eating the body and blood of Christ was a necessary way for Him to express to an audience fixated on their physical hunger the need for all people to find salvation—to satisfy their spiritual hunger—through Him.

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