

What the Bible Teaches About Eucharist, Part 2

By Jim Penrice

The sixth chapter of the Gospel of John speaks very powerfully of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Let's walk through this carefully one step at a time.

John 6 opens with the only miracle story that appears in all four Gospels: the feeding of the five-thousand. It is significant that of all the miracles Jesus performed, this is the only one found in all four Gospels. As we shall soon see, its purpose as a precursor of the Eucharist makes it a very powerful sign.

Notice I called this story "the feeding of the five-thousand" and not "the multiplication of the loaves and fish," as it is sometimes called. Jesus did not multiply anything here. Multiplication means to add to an original quantity to make a greater amount. ("Johnny has five barley loaves in a basket. He then he adds five more baskets. Johnny now has thirty loaves.") That's not what happened.

Jesus did not make thousands of new loaves and fish appear. That would have also been amazing, and if it had happened that way the Gospels would tell us so. But that's not what happened. The Gospels tell us that the miracle was Jesus feeding five-thousand people with the same five loaves and the same two fish. (John tells us that the disciples "filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were

left over by those who had eaten.” Mark tells us “the two fish he divided among them all.”)

No matter how many people consumed them, and no matter how much they consumed, Jesus fed each of the five-thousand people with the same fish and the same loaves, not new and different ones. They never changed their appearance, size or number—there was no outward change in these elements. This is physically impossible, but Jesus did it.

Next in John 6 Jesus does something else physically impossible—he walks on water. These two episodes set the stage for what comes next: a teaching that likewise seems to defy both nature and logic.

In verse 35 Jesus says “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.” In verse 40 the Jews begin to murmur among themselves. Their objection at this point has nothing to do with Jesus calling himself bread. They assume he is using a figure of speech which he often did (“I am the vine, I am the door,” etc.) They object because Jesus claims to have come down from heaven.

But the conversation takes a new turn in verse 51, when Jesus 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.”

The Greek verb John uses for “eat” here is φάγω, which can mean either literal eating or figuratively consuming intellectual and spiritual nourishment. But to the Jews in this audience, the possibility at least existed at this point that Jesus may be speaking literally, as we see in their response in verse 52: “How can this man give us His flesh to eat?” Nobody raised such a question when they knew Jesus was speaking purely figuratively. Nobody asked “How can this man be a vine?” or “How can this man be a door?” when they understood he was using a figure of speech. But this audience recognized that there was at least the possibility that he was speaking literally. (Especially since in that culture to speak figuratively of eating another’s flesh was a statement of hatred for that person—see Micah 3:3. If Jesus was speaking figuratively the Jews would have interpreted this to mean “Whoever hates me will live forever,” which would have made no sense.)

But starting in verse 53, after the Jews raised these objections, John uses a different verb. He now uses σάξ, which means only a literal eating—in fact, it means to gnaw, to physically chew. After this change to the exclusively literal verb, the Jews who object are no longer murmuring—now they walk. They clearly understand Jesus to be speaking literally, and they want nothing to do with this.

His use of the Greek word for “flesh” instead of the more ambivalent word for “body” also reinforces that he is speaking of literally eating his flesh.

When we put this together with the Passover context presented in Part 1, it is clear what Jesus was saying at the last Supper. This IS his body, this IS his blood.

Some commentators raise the objection of the Jewish prohibition against drinking blood which this would seem to violate. That commandment was part of the old covenant. Jesus makes it clear in Luke 22:20 that “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.” That old rule does not apply here.