

A Spiritual Interpretation of John 6 : 52—59

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Interpretations of this passage generally vary along two lines, the spiritual and the sacramental. It is the purpose of this article to show that both from the context of this passage and from exegesis of the passage itself the spiritual interpretation is more fitting than the sacramental. That the language of this passage is difficult, even strange and enigmatic, will be agreed by all. It was considered a 'hard saying' by those who first heard it.

In the immediate background of this passage is the feeding of the five thousand. Verses 47 and 54 use identical language and identical tenses in describing the one who 'has eternal life'. In verse 47, 'He who believes has eternal life'; in verse 54, 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life'. Believing and eating are both continuous actions; both apparently refer to one and the same thing. Both produce the same fruit, eternal life. We seem justified, therefore, in understanding that believing in Christ and eating his flesh are identical actions. He speaks of Himself as the living Bread which came down out of heaven, of which if any man eat he will live forever; and then He explains that the bread which He will give is His flesh, which will be given for the life of the world. He is obviously referring to His coming death, though He does not yet introduce the term 'blood' in verse 51.

What did He mean, then, in this context when He referred to His flesh? To give His flesh was to offer Himself as a sacrifice. He was the Word become Flesh; He had come down from heaven. But here He presents Himself not only as one who had come down from heaven, but as one who had come here to die; not only as one who had become flesh, but as one who would offer his flesh as a sacrifice for the life of the world. The term 'flesh', then, stands for his human nature, and the term 'blood' makes more deeply impressive the suggestion of His death when it appears for the first time in verse 53. This spiritual interpretation in the context immediately preceding our passage is made even more emphatic by the Lord Himself in the discussion immediately following, where He affirms: 'It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no avail'. This may be taken as Christ's own

interpretation of the statement He has just made about eating His flesh and drinking His blood: that which gives life is feeding on the Spirit which led the Word to become flesh.

Macgregor (*Moffatt Commentary*) sees the spiritual implications in the context of this passage, but when he comes to the passage itself he falls back on the 'literal' interpretation which is at the basis of the sacramental interpretation. Then, being torn between the literal and the spiritual interpretations, he has to fall back on an altogether artificial explanation of the difficulty which he has created for himself. If the spiritual interpretation of this passage itself (6:52-59) can be reasonably sustained, then the unity of the whole chapter will also be sustained. There seem to us to be three points of exegesis in the passage itself which abundantly support the spiritual interpretation.

First of all, the use of the term 'flesh' instead of 'body' has seemed significant to some commentators. This may be taken as the first evidence that the Lord was not referring to the Lord's Supper in this passage. In all the other cases of reference to the Lord's Supper, it is Christ's 'Body' that is referred to, not His 'Flesh' (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:19, 20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). New Testament writers are likewise just as careful not to use the term 'Body' but to use the term 'Flesh' when referring to His incarnation and death in circumstances not related to the Lord's Supper. For example, John 1:14; Romans 1:3; 1 Tim. 3:16 and 1 John 4:2 refer to His incarnation as a manifestation in the 'flesh'; and Romans 8:3; Eph. 2:15; Col. 1:22; Heb. 10:20; and 1 Peter 3:18; and 4:1 interpret the atonement in terms of death in the 'flesh'.

Regardless of how one interprets the sentence 'This is my body', there is complete agreement that in the observance of the Lord's Supper it is the Lord's Body which is given prominence, not His Flesh. It appears that there is a significant difference in the meaning and usage of the two words. The Word became flesh; He was manifest in the flesh. He suffered in the flesh; He abolished in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances. The terms 'flesh' and 'body' were not considered to be equivalent or interchangeable, and even with us they are not so used. Therefore, it does not seem reasonable to make the 'flesh' and 'blood' of John 6:52-59 refer to the sacramental elements used in the observance of the Lord's Supper. The spiritual interpretation would make the terms here refer to the necessity for appropriation of the whole personality, the whole spirit of sacrifice, of the Lord Jesus Christ. If it be objected that later Church Fathers, such as Justin and Ignatius, used 'flesh' and 'body' interchangeably in the sacramental ritual, we may reply that they did so because they had accepted the sacramental interpretation of this passage, but they did so without proper regard to the distinction observed throughout the New Testament with regard to these terms.

A second point needs to be observed regarding the thrice-repeated use in this passage of the word 'trogo', found elsewhere in the New Testament in only two places (Matt. 24:38; John 13:18). This is a very special word meaning to gnaw, crunch, chew. After using the common word for eating, 'phagete' from 'esthio', in the opening statement in verse 53, Jesus shifts to this very unusual word 'trogo' in verses 54, 56 and 57. A careful exegesis would inquire as to the reason for the shift. We must expect that there is in this newly-introduced word some special meaning which is meant to be conveyed to us by its introduction. In English we speak of 'chewing the cud', in the sense of cogitation or meditation. Some of the Indian languages have a similar usage. This word 'trogo' has that possible connotation. If we take that meaning, then, 'eating the flesh' (ho trogon ten sarka) means to munch, to chew, that is, to meditate slowly and appreciatively, deliberately and leisurely, on the total virtues of Christ, his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, and all that flows from them. If we take this meaning, it refers to a spiritual assimilation of His qualities through meditation upon Him.

There is yet another point to be brought forth from this passage. There is not only a change of words as between verse 53 and the verses that follow; there is also a change in the tenses of the verbs. In the former, 'phagete' is in the aorist tense, signifying a single act, an act done once for all. In the latter three cases, 'trogon' is a present participle denoting that which is continuous and characteristic. Verse 53 speaks of the initial act, at one point in time, when the person for the first time tastes of the Bread which is Christ, and is saved through that experience of faith. 'Trogon' in verses 54, 56 and 57 speaks of the continuous, constant, daily, unbroken feeding of the soul on the flesh and blood of Christ, meditating on Him. This would not be satisfied by an occasional, even regularly repeated, participation in the Lord's Supper. It is important in this connection also to compare the tense used here with the tense used in verse 47, whereby it can be seen that the 'eating' is equivalent to 'believing', and both are continuous actions.

This passage, then, provides no sanction for ritualism, and there is no conflict between a spiritual interpretation for part of the chapter and a literal interpretation for another part of the chapter. The entire chapter has a spiritual meaning, and is a united whole. The evidence is cumulative in favour of the spiritual interpretation throughout. Therefore, when Christ in this passage speaks of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, we may take it that He means regular, habitual and continuous meditation on Him, participation in the Spirit which led Him to become flesh, union with Him in the spirit of our life. Such feeding produces eternal life here and now. The one so feeding has eternal life as a present possession.