

A Close Reading of John 6: Is it Sacramental and Why Does it Matter?

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The latter part of the sixth chapter of John has been a lightning-rod for theologians. The aim of this paper is to elucidate some of the reasons there are varied and conflicting interpretations of this section of Scripture. After the theological background is laid, the sixth chapter of John will be explained carefully in context. Only a close, sequential reading of Scripture will ultimately validate a particular interpretation. Any interpretation, no matter how creative or desirable, is not of God if it does not agree with the words He has given.

Historical Interpretations of John 6

For the interpretation of John 6, Luther has been a dominant force until the nineteenth century. A Lutheran should hear and consider his words, as the “foremost teacher,” though not accept them without comparison to God’s Word.¹ He is still just a teacher, and not an authority, no matter how insightful his work.

Luther did not mince words when describing John 6 and whether it talked about the Lord’s Supper: “In the first place the sixth chapter of John must be entirely excluded from this discussion [of the Supper], since it does not refer to the sacrament in a single syllable. Not only because the sacrament was not yet instituted, but even more because this passage itself and the sentences following plainly show, as I have already stated, that Christ is speaking of faith in the incarnate

¹FC SD VII, 41; Kolb-Wengert, 600.

Word.”² He did not waver on his position. In His thorough “Great Confession on the Lord’s Supper,” he refused to examine John 6, because “the sixth chapter of John does not refer at all to the Supper.”³ This chapter of John came up frequently in discussions about the Lord’s Supper. Most of the theologians who denied that Christ’s body was orally received went first to John 6:63a,⁴ rather than to the words of institution.⁵ But Luther’s position, was not just a polemical tactic.⁶ We have 21 continuous sermons on John 6:26-71, which cover 192 pages in the American Edition of his works.⁷ Here he instructs God’s flock on the benefits of faith.

Virtually all Lutherans until the nineteenth century followed Luther’s position on John 6.⁸ The exceptions are not known as orthodox Lutherans.⁹ In Luther’s time, the Roman church was by no means unified on the issue. There was much tradition both for and against a sacramental interpretation. Augustine’s exegesis on John 6 proved influential for Luther and many in the Roman church. Luther’s opponent Cardinal Cajetan held the same basic position as Luther, just

²*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36:19.

³*Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), LW 37:360.

⁴“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing.” All passages NKJV unless otherwise noted.

⁵Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body: Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar*, Revised Ed. (Adelaide, Australia: Openbook, 1977), 191.

⁶In over 200 references to John 6:53-63 in the American Edition of his works, “Luther never, however, uses John 6 to specifically refer to the Sacrament of the Altar.” Mark P. Braden, unpublished paper, 2003 (given to me by the author), 33.

⁷Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8* (1530-31), trans. Martin Bertram, vol. 23 of Luther’s Works (LW) (St. Louis: CPH, 1959), 5-197.

⁸John Gerhard (1582-1637) is cited on both sides of this issue. His view on a doctrinal level is clear. In answering whether John 6 sanctions communion in one kind, he says: “John 6 does not refer to the consecrated bread in the holy supper, but rather to the bread of life, which comes down from heaven. Also, it is not characterized as a sacramental, but rather as a spiritual nourishment from the body and blood of Christ.” Yet, in a more nuanced view he could include the words of John 6:53, without explanation, in a chapter entitled “Concerning the Sayings and Types of the Old Testament Which in Advance Foretell This Sacrament.” In poetic style Gerhard compares Christ to the tree of life in Eden and says His flesh is food indeed. Many verses in this chapter are qualified in their application to the Supper. For instance on Isaiah 25:6, he comments: “In all this the prophet is actually speaking of the spiritual meal which God the Lord has prepared in the holy Gospel for grace-hungry souls. But since the holy Supper is a seal which is attached to the Gospel promise, one can rightly apply this text to it.” Here we have a more sophisticated position: homiletically there is more leeway in using the words of Scripture, whereas the church’s doctrine must have a reliable foundation on clear Scripture. *A Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, 1610, trans. Elmer Hohle, eds. David Berger and James D. Heiser (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2000), 214, 341-344; 214.

⁹The syncretist George Calixtus, and the pietists John Arndt (1555-1621) and Johann Albrecht Bengel (d. 1752) are noted. Craig R. Koester, “John Six and the Lord’s Supper,” in *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (1990), 424-425. John R. Stephenson, *The Lord’s Supper*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics Vol. XII (Northville, SD: The Luther Academy, 2003), 40.

as did Calvin.¹⁰ The Council of Trent came to no conclusion on the matter.¹¹ Chemnitz summarizes the catholicity of Luther's interpretation, which Luther claimed was simply Augustine's: "For when Christ in this sermon speaks concerning his flesh and blood, all interpreters, ancients and those more recent, as many Lutherans and Calvinists, and also the papists, understand by these words the very person of Christ, with all his benefits and merits."¹²

Besides a few isolated theologians, this teaching is consistent among Lutherans until the modern era. In the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Loehe advocated a more sacramental interpretation.¹³ Both Warner Elert and Herman Sasse followed suit.¹⁴ Why do many modern Lutherans no longer follow Luther in this matter?

Modern Interpretations of John 6

What marks a dramatic change are new assumptions regarding Scripture, born out of historical criticism. The reasoning behind one's position is more important than whether it is called 'sacramental.' Luther, as did most non-sacramental interpreters, said that the John 6 discourse occurred chronologically before the words of institution. Chemnitz summarizes: "those who contend that this sixth chapter properly and through itself pertains to the doctrine of the Supper hallucinate most grievously. For indeed this sermon occurred in Capernaum in the third year of the ministry of Christ, though in turn the holy supper was instituted not before the following fourth year, in Jerusalem, in the night in which Christ was betrayed."¹⁵ The historical context (that Jesus was speaking to unbelieving Jews) and the Gospel chronology were clear reasons it did not reference the Sacrament. But modern critical investigations caused a weakening and even an out-right denial of the historical basis of the biblical text. The Gospels, in particular,

¹⁰"In his own commentary on John's Gospel Cajetan stated that John 6 did not speak 'of eating and drinking the sacrament, but of eating and drinking the death of Jesus.'" John Calvin (d. 1564) too followed in the steps of Augustine's argument to show that the discourse "does not refer to the Lord's Supper, but to the continual communication which we have apart from the reception of the Lord's Supper." Koester, 423-424.

¹¹Koester, 424.

¹²"The Chemnitz-Leyser-Gerhard *Harmonia* on John 6 and the Supper," trans. Matt Harrison, in *Reflections*, Vol. VI (Fall 1990-91, No. 1), 26.

¹³Sasse mentions J.G. Scheibel in an 1823 work and Theodor Zahn (1838-1933) as sacramental interpreters of John 6. *This is My Body*, 144.

¹⁴Stephenson, *The Lord's Supper*, 39-40.

¹⁵*Harmonia*, 25.

by the twentieth century, were no longer seen as simple historical narratives. The rationalistic denial of Scripture's historicity and enlightenment-influenced assumptions on religion caused scholarly uncertainty over Jesus' words. The focus in exegesis became the Gospel writers and their context.¹⁶ No longer thought to be inspired writers, they became seen as creative authors and distinctive theologians in their own right.

After World War II, "redaction criticism," became a specific method in exegesis.

It is concerned with studying the theological motivation of an author as this is revealed in the collection, arrangement, editing, and modification of traditional material, and in the composition of new material or the creation of new forms within the traditions of early Christianity. Although the discipline is called redaction criticism, it could equally be called "composition criticism" because it is concerned with the composition of new material and the arrangements of redacted or freshly created material into new units and patterns, as well as with redaction of existing material.¹⁷

Due to critical efforts, finding the historical Jesus was a dead-end, so the focus shifted to the Gospel writer (called the redactor or editor).

Almost universally, modern interpreters of the Bible refer to the theology of a particular redactor, not one unified theology of the Bible.¹⁸ This critical insight changed both the presumed historical and theological context of the John 6 narrative. No longer was it a sermon of Jesus to Jews after the feeding of the 5000, it became allegedly overlaid with symbolism and allusions meant for later Christians, not the first audience recorded in Scripture.¹⁹ Because it is assumed

¹⁶ "Gospels are not ['arranged chronologically like'] diaries but post-resurrection, interpretive, theological commentaries on what Jesus said and did All four Evangelists, and not just John wrote their Gospels after and in the light of the resurrection within the real life situations in which the authors found themselves. With the exception of the birth, death, and resurrection narratives, the Gospels are theologically arranged, not necessarily according to time sequence, but according to topics." David Scaer, "Once More to John 6," in *Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord: Essays in Honor of Glen Zweck on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday* eds. J. Bart Day and Andrew Smith (Houston: The Zweck Festschrift Committee, 2000), 224-25. The move from viewing Scripture as straightforward, historically accurate documents to theological commentaries for a later time masquerading to be simple, historical narratives of Jesus' life is drastic. Luke's words contradict that shift in thinking. "I too decided to write an orderly account" Luke 1:3.

¹⁷ Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 1.

¹⁸ This description of Louis J. Martyn's *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* summarizes redaction criticism well: "The author distinguishes between tradition and redaction in the case of four blocks of Johannine material, all miracle stories, and then goes on to draw conclusions both about the theology of John and about the historical situation in the church in which John was writing." Perrin, 85.

¹⁹ "The original first-century audience was composed of two primary groups: (1) those who participated in the events of Jesus' life (the ministry of Jesus in A.D. 30) and (2) those who received the Gospel (Luke's church in A.D. 55-60)." Arthur Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 5.

that John, the real source of Jesus' words, wrote in a liturgical, churchly setting, license is assumed to pursue exactly those types of interpretations.²⁰

Besides the obvious problem regarding the authority of Scripture, the historicity of biblical accounts is at best considered irrelevant. The twentieth century German theologian Rudolf Bultmann, who denied the possibility of miracles, is a frequent foil for sacramental interpreters of John. He taught that "Johannine tradition asserts that the Spirit and the Word are opposed to all forms of sacramentalism."²¹ In opposition, theologians on the other side of the sacramental aisle claimed the opposite: they see the sacraments everywhere in John, reasoning from John's assumed context. The Gospel of John becomes a touchstone because it does not explicitly mention the institution of the sacraments. In fact, in place of the institution of the Supper John 13 contains Jesus washing the disciples' feet. That John did not consider it worth mentioning the sacraments is offensive to many. But redaction criticism allows one to ignore the textual situation.²² According to the Catholic Raymond Brown, Jesus' words were edited later to "bring out the sacramental undertones."²³ Oscar Cullman, and many Roman Catholics suddenly found "sacramental allusions in *every* Johannine story."²⁴ These kind of *a priori* hermeneutics ultimately tell us much more about the interpreter than about the biblical text itself. Once modifications and changes to the received text are allowed, almost any theological position can

²⁰"The way in which one understands the Gospel of John depends, it seems to me, upon the context in which it was written. . . . I would suggest that the Word of the Gospel is not only the foundation of the church, but it was written by a churchman, in the context of the church. In a book of the church, we should fully expect to see churchly references to such things as baptism, the Lord's supper and the like." Peter Scaer, "Jesus and the Woman at the Well: Where Mission Meets Worship," Paper given at Concordia Theological Seminary Exegetical Symposium (Fort Wayne, Indiana, 2002), 19-20. Thus, the unproven and unknown redactor's context we do not have becomes more authoritative and significant than the words of Jesus we do have.

²¹Frederick W. Guyette, "Sacramentality in the Fourth Gospel: Conflicting Interpretation," in *Ecclesiology* 3.2 (2007), 236.

²²"The prologue necessitates that one adopt a sacramental consciousness in order to understand the theology of this Gospel." David Scaer, "Once More to John 6," 230. This is an interesting position, since the prologue does not mention or even allude to the sacraments. In saying a special "consciousness" or extra-Scriptural hermeneutic is needed, the perspicuity of Scripture is denied. "The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of the terms. Truly it is insipid and impious, when we know that the subject matter of Scripture has been placed in the clearest light, to call it obscure on account of a few obscure words." "It is true that for many people much remains abstruse; but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but to the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth." Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), LW 33:26-27.

²³Koester, 436.

²⁴Guyette, 240.

be easily justified. Modern interpreters seem to bring more to the text than they carry from it.²⁵ Luther does not argue from what the text “must” say, like a modern, but what it actually does say: “I now remind you that these words are not to be misconstrued and made to refer to the Sacrament of the Altar; whoever so interprets them does violence to this Gospel text. There is not a letter in it that refers to the Lord’s Supper.”²⁶

The clarity of Scripture, a necessary dogma of a church whose sole authority is the Bible, is not defended by modern exegetes.²⁷ The setting of the redactor, not the context given in the Gospel, becomes the key to interpreting.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, developments in historical critical scholarship significantly weakened the arguments for a non-sacramental reading of the text. The Reformers maintained that a reference to the Lord’s Supper would be incongruous in John 6 since the sacrament had not yet been instituted. Critical scholars, however, understood the Johannine discourses as *creative compositions by the evangelist, not transcriptions of Jesus’ own words*, therefore a reference to the sacrament, which would have been incongruous on the lips of the historical Jesus, could simply reflect the interest of the later church.²⁸

The nature and authority of Scripture is the larger question behind differing John 6 interpretations.²⁹ “Such [critical] methods are not without value in that the earliest church reflections on the Lord’s Supper are seen to resemble closely what later became the classical Reformed view of a symbolical meal. Texts in their final form, as we have them in the Bible, were *encrusted* with views now associated with Lutherans and Catholics ... the Gospels preserve both earlier and later reflections on the Last Supper.”³⁰ The major problem with this stance is that the words

²⁵This is a saying from Saint Hilary of Poitiers (c. 300 - c. 368). Chemnitz, *Harmonia*, 25.

²⁶Church Postil of 1528. Martin Luther, *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7 vol. , ed. and trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 2.1:402. To make Luther’s situation determinative is not to take Luther’s claim to follow Scripture seriously. “In a different situation the reformer may have allowed his intuition to follow his instincts to develop a eucharistic interpretation of John 6. His situation did not allow him this luxury. Ours does.” David Scaer, “Once More to John 6,” 233. But the text of Scripture has not changed, instead, the assumed nature of the text and presuppositions in interpreting have.

²⁷“And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” II Pet. 1:19.

²⁸Koester, 426. [emphasis added]

²⁹“The argument that John 6 is not eucharistic because the Lord’s Supper had not yet been instituted exposes a remarkable ignorance about what the Gospels are.” David Scaer, “Once More to John 6,” 225-26. This is the heart of the matter, though it presupposes that almost no one understood the nature of the Gospels until the advent of critical methodology.

³⁰David Scaer, “Reformed Exegesis and Lutheran Sacraments: Worlds in Conflict,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 64, no. 1 (Jan 2000), 18-19. [emphasis added]

attributed to Jesus are no longer really His Words, since they have been redacted, changed, or even falsified to reflect a later situation. These critical methods make the whole Bible unsuitable as a doctrinal source and norm.³¹

The issue is no longer what the text itself says, but one's "sacramental hermeneutics," unrecoverable traditions behind the text, or vague symbolism. Luther, and even Catholic theologians of his time, could not conceive of the Scriptural text as a hodge-podge mixture of traditions and redactions indicating a theological intent, but not a historical one.³² They saw their doctrine as based and authorized on clear words of God which are historically accurate. Because of the assumed unity of Scripture across time and writers, the Gospel of John's perceived lack of sacramentality gave no pause to pre-modern interpreters.³³ The Gospels were not seen as representative of competing theologies, but as foundations for one grand, God-given theology—the correct one.

Now further it must also be considered whether and to what extent the teaching of this sermon [John 6] may be accommodated to the doctrine of the most holy Sacrament of the Supper. They teach most correctly who state that however many dogmas of the church there are, each individual article of the faith has its own *sedes* [Latin for seat] in certain passages of Scripture. And there where it is given directly, it ought to be explicated, if only we desire to obtain the true and native understanding of the heavenly doctrine. If we do this in the present matter we shall see, more clearly than the mid-day sun, that those who contend that this sixth chapter properly and through itself pertains to the doctrine of the Supper hallucinate most grievously.³⁴

The change in Jesus' audience, marks the change in exegetical assumptions. In redaction

³¹Tradition, whether ancient or modern, must creep in to fill the void. This was not the case for the confessional authors: "First, that we reject and condemn all heresy and error that was rejected and condemned in the first, ancient, orthodox church on the true and firm foundation of holy, divine Scripture." FC SD Intro., 17; Kolb-Wengert, 530.

³²"And although there had always been spiritual eating in the church, yet the dogma of the Lord's Supper surely was not in the church prior to that institution. But the sermon in John 6 preceded by more than a year that night in which Christ was betrayed, as the numbering and annotation of the festivals of the Passover in John very clearly demonstrates." Martin Chemnitz, *Lord's Supper*, trans. J.A.O Preus (St. Louis: CPH, 1979), 236.

³³"This Gospel text [John 6:44-51] teaches exclusively of the Christian faith, and awakens that faith in us; just as John, throughout his whole Gospel, simply instructs us how to trust in Christ the Lord. This faith alone, when based upon the sure promises of God, must save us; as our text clearly explains" (Church Postil of 1528). Luther, *Complete Sermons*, 2.1:396. This interpretation has the benefit of being clearly stated by the Gospel writer: "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" John 20:30-31.

³⁴*Harmonia*, 25.

criticism the early church becomes the setting and its concerns become the topic of Jesus' words.³⁵ Luther would not deny that Christ was talking to all Christians, but to say that the most immediate context of Jesus' words was a situation after His ascension, would be unthinkable to him.

“When the biblical events are treated in isolation from one another, that is, not as a post-Easter reflection of the apostles in the life of the church that was born in baptism and was nourished by the Lord's Supper, a non-sacramental reading of the biblical texts is inevitable.”³⁶ This assumption that one must have the right knowledge of the sacraments to see the sacramental allusions leaves Scripture unclear at best and unhistorical at its worst. Before modern critical methods were used on the Bible, it was not possible to think that the proper audience of Scriptural conversations were people *not* mentioned in the text.³⁷ This description of Calvin's thinking would apply to everyone, before the eighteenth century: “It was inconceivable to him that the pericope could reflect the actual liturgical practice of the early church, having been written from a post-resurrection perspective. Because of the chronology of events in the Gospel narrative, Calvin almost had to interpret this pericope as a reference to a ‘perpetual eating of faith’ as if eating were simply a metaphor for believing.” “Modern ‘higher criticism’ with its capacity to analyze, deconstruct, and reconstruct biblical texts, however, was simply not available to him.”³⁸ Luther's conclusions seem incredible and simplistic to those marinated in historical critical assumptions. If in John 6 Jesus' words are reflections of the later church's situation, no certain knowledge can be gained from the text itself.³⁹

³⁵ “A post-Easter church celebrating the eucharist understood these words in light of her own sacramental practice.” David Scaer, “Once More to John 6,” 232. Even if this were admitted, does it suggest that we are to understand it in that light? To do so is to go beyond the text and read into it.

³⁶ David Scaer, “Reformed Exegesis,” 18.

³⁷ One such example is from Hermann Sasse. “John deliberately left out the institution of the sacrament in his narrative of the Last Supper . . . he did not want the pagan readers to know everything. This is the reason why the Sacraments are not directly mentioned. Chapter 6 shows that Jesus spoke about the future sacrament even before his passion, but this could be a hint only as to what was going to happen later. Whatever this mysterious chapter may mean, it cannot be the source of our knowledge about the Sacrament of the Altar. *This is My body*, 144.

³⁸ Eleanor B. Hanna, “Biblical Interpretation and Sacramental Practice: John Calvin's Interpretation of John 6:51-58,” in *Worship* 73, No. 1 (May 1999), 228, 219.

³⁹ If earlier (first audience) and later (second audience) views are both present, how will they be separated and explicated? That is in essence to say that the Scriptures contain two or more theologies in competition. Without unity, the Scriptures cannot be an authority.

A Sacramental Definition

The word “sacramental” has no one definition. “Sacrament” is a “church Latin loan-translation of Greek *mysterion*, ‘mystery.’”⁴⁰ Though it is a translation of biblical word (μυστήριον), the ecclesiastical definition is not the biblical one. The Latin *Sacramentum* means oath or rite, but in the Scriptures μυστήριον (mystery) refers to teaching or doctrine revealed by God.⁴¹

The following passages show how μυστήριον is primarily about the whole Christian revelation in Christ: “Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past” (Rom. 16:25). “The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:26-27). To define a “mystery” as a rite is anachronistic.⁴² As Luther says: “The Holy Scriptures contain one sacrament only, which is the Lord Jesus Christ himself.”⁴³ In Col. 1:27 the mystery is defined as “Christ in you.”⁴⁴

On the other hand, the churchly definition of “sacrament” is a rite instituted by Christ that contains the promise of grace. Usually we think of two, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Due to the Supper’s continual celebration and place in Christian worship it is often called just “the Sacrament.” But without a biblical mandate, one must limit the meaning of sacrament, lest it mean everything. If we define “sacrament” wide enough there is nothing that is not

⁴⁰“sacrament” Dictionary.com, Online Etymology Dictionary, Douglas Harper, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sacrament>.

⁴¹“Sacrament” *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy*, Geddes MacGregor (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 550.

⁴²This passage is often read narrower than its Scriptural setting: “This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed” (Eph. 4:1). The “mysteries” refer to whole teaching of the Gospel of Christ, which are to be taught. This would include the sacraments, but it is not limited to liturgical acts.

⁴³Quoted in Guyette, 243. See Luther, *Commentary on Hebrews* (1518), LW 29:123-34, 225. A later statement from 1538: “Christ is presented to us as gift or sacrament.” Martin Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther’s Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, ed. and trans. Holger Sonntag, Cygnus Series (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008), 111.

⁴⁴Augustine uses “sacrament” in this way for the feeding of the 5000: “After the sacrament of the miracle, He introduces discourse, that, if possible, they who have been fed may be further fed, that He may with discourse fill their minds, whose bellies He filled with the loaves, provided they take in.” *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans. John Gibb. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1888.) rev. and ed. Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701025.htm>.

“sacramental.” For example, the following quote uses “sacramental” in the wide and narrow sense: Luther’s view of the Bible “included a Creator who was intimately involved with His creation and was therefore thoroughly incarnational and sacramental. Lutherans, following their theological father expect to find an abundance of incarnational and sacramental [narrow sense] references everywhere in the bible, an impossibility for the neo-Evangelical scholars.”⁴⁵ This is why John 6 has become a false litmus test for demonstrating one’s Lutheranism. Though it is not a historic Lutheran position, it is reasoned that many sacramental references are logical if God is involved with creation. However, the Bible was not written as a polemic text against “neo-Evangelical scholars,” or any other group. It is not a large number of allusions which establish doctrine, but one clear word of God.

The Lutheran Confessions clarify this point:

Finally, if everything that has the command of God and some promise added to it ought to be counted a sacrament, why not include prayer, which can most truly be called a sacrament? Were it included among the sacraments, as though in a more exalted position, it would encourage people to pray. Alms and afflictions could also be listed here, which are themselves signs to which God has added promises. But let us skip over all of this. No intelligent person will argue much about the number or terminology, as long as those things are retained that have the mandate and promises of God.⁴⁶

Because of its varied uses, it is necessary to define the word “sacramental.” In this paper it will refer to a text being about the Lord’s Supper in its simple, plain sense.

Scripture

The most controversial facet of John 6, is that because it resembles somewhat the words of institution, a sacramental interpretation is easy to make. That is not just a recent phenomenon. But today, one’s interpretation of this passage often reveals more about one’s doctrine of Scripture. The divide between ancient and modern commentators is not “is John 6 sacramental?”; but whether John’s Gospel is reliable history. The chronology of the Gospel was assumed reliable in

⁴⁵David Scaer, “Reformed Exegesis,” 18.

⁴⁶*Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, XIII, 16-17; Kolb-Wengert, 221.

the past. But today even fairly conservative theologians deny that everything in the Bible is of the same cloth.

The transition from one theme to the next is so abrupt, the tension between the statement about the spiritual eating of Christ in faith and that about the sacramental eating and drinking of His flesh and blood is so great that John 6:51b-58 has been interpreted as an insertion by which the ecclesiastical doctrine of the Lord's Supper as "medicine of immortality" was introduced into the Fourth Gospel, which was originally not interested in the Sacrament and therefore ignored the institution of the Lord's Supper (thus R. Bultmann, *Das Johannes Evangelium*, 161ff.). Now this gospel, just like the synoptics, also in other respects shows traces of a complicated process of development, and it is quite conceivable that the discourses as we read them today may have come together from various sources. But to lay bare some sort of original John [Ur-Johannes] from the text as we have it is impossible.⁴⁷

When examined carefully, the sacramental question is secondary to the presuppositions that are brought to the text. When doctrine is assumed and read into Scripture, instead of read out of Scripture, God's Word is lost.

Here is an extreme example of one who has all exegetical answers before reading the text:

If one has difficulty seeing Christ as the treasure buried in the field, or as the Good Samaritan, or as Moses with outstretched arms, then he will certainly not find the Sacraments, the Office of the Holy Ministry and the Church in these loci. It is not surprising that in churches where Holy Communion is an occasional added extra a kind of Nestorian separation occurs, on the one hand, between Christ, and on the other, between His Sacraments, His Ministry and His Church. Those open to patristic exegesis will see Baptism and the Supper in the two streams which flowed from the Savior's riven side, but those with a proof-text mentality will see an unexplainable physiological phenomenon.⁴⁸

In this view, John 6 is just a pawn in a larger polemical battle for a maximizing the "full sacramental interpretation of the biblical texts."⁴⁹

But do more biblical references really buttress the Church's doctrine? Allusions, typology, or hidden sacramental messages are by definition not clear. Even if multitudes of these vague sacramental readings were conceded, would it explain anything about them or benefit the church?

⁴⁷Hermann Sasse, *We Confess the Sacraments*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985); *We Confess Anthology*, reprint, vol. 2 of 3, (St. Louis: CPH, 1999), 78.

⁴⁸Peter M. Berg, "Reflections on a Christological Hermeneutic with a Glance Toward John 6," in *Motley Magpie*, Vol. 3, Number 3 (July 2005) http://hopelutheranfremont.org/motley/v3n3_a3.htm.

⁴⁹David Scaer, "Reformed Exegesis," 10.

No. Mere symbolic mentions of a sacramental act do not profit faith. The Lord's Supper and Baptism do not offer grace apart from Christ and the promise of life in Him. An unclear, unspecific word is not useful for practice or faith. Luther had a primarily dogmatic interpretation of Scripture.⁵⁰ The Hussites, much like the Orthodox church, looked to John 6:53 as authoritative for the Supper. Luther, on the other hand dismissed that notion: "the Bohemians cannot properly rely on this passage in support of the sacrament in both kinds."⁵¹ The method of clear biblical texts establishing doctrine was not unique to Lutherans. The argument over the Supper between Luther and his opponents centered on which passage is primary: John 6 or its institution.

A common roadblock thrown up to a non-sacramental interpretation of John 6 is John 3:5: "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit." What has commonly been taken as a reference to Baptism, seems to indicate that John 6 must be sacramental. But the contexts of these narratives are quite different. In John 3 Jesus is conversing with Nicodemus, a pharisee and "a ruler of the Jews" (v1). But the pharisees were familiar with Baptism, since John had baptized before Jesus' ministry began. "People went out to [John the Baptist] from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?'" (Matt. 3:5-7) Jesus in John 3 was not discussing something which did not exist at the time or His audience did not know about.⁵²

Luther did not assume his doctrine, but claimed to base his teaching on Scripture. Instead of a passage that did not explicitly talk about the Supper (John 6), Luther continually redirected

⁵⁰"Yet we do not hereby condemn the Fathers and teachers who used and adduced the sixth chapter of John with respect to the Supper, just as they surely oftentimes adduce other passages unevenly. For their opinion is, after all, certainly right and good, that they testify thereby to the presence of Christ's genuine flesh and blood in the Supper. Therefore we must consider it to their credit, even though they do not capture the precise sense of the text, because they nevertheless thereby powerfully and clearly demonstrate their [orthodox] intent. In order to support articles of faith, texts must be apprehended certainly in their proper, simple sense, which is not necessary when one is preaching or admonishing at large." Luther, *To Albrecht of Prussia against the Sectarians*, (1532), quoted in Stephenson, *The Lord's Supper*, 40.

⁵¹*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36:20.

⁵²This was the same Baptism we have which grants the forgiveness of sins, though the Spirit had not been given yet. "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" Luke 3:3.

the argument to the words of institution at the 1529 Marburg Colloquy.

If you [Oecolampadius] regard the flesh as useless, you may do so as far I am concerned; but we rely on God's Word. The Word says, first, that Christ has a body: that I believe. Furthermore, that even this body has ascended to heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father: that I also believe. The Word says in the same way that this body itself is in the Lord's Supper, and is given to us to be eaten: that also I believe. For my Lord Jesus Christ can easily do it when he desires to, and in his words he testifies that he will do it. On these words I shall rely steadfastly until he himself, by another word, says something different.⁵³

The doctrine of original sin was a significant factor in Luther's approach to Scripture. What is "reasonable" to sinful man is not godly. The Old Adam is opposed to the truth of God. In regards to the Supper, Luther speaks of his own struggles:

I confess that if Dr. Karlstadt, or anyone else, could have convinced me five years ago that only bread and wine were in the sacrament he would have done me a great service. At that time I suffered such severe conflicts and inner strife and torment that I would gladly have been delivered from them. I realized that at this point I could best resist the papacy. There were two who then wrote me, with much more skill than Dr. Karlstadt has, and who did not torture the Word with their own preconceived notions. But I am a captive and cannot free myself. The text is too powerfully present, and will not allow itself to be torn from its meaning by mere verbiage.⁵⁴

This authoritative view of Scripture is at odds with a redacted Scripture that is teeming with contradictory and polyvalent meaning.

Two Types of Eating

Despite the fact that the Lord's Supper is not dealt with in John 6, this passage continually comes up in discussions on the Supper.⁵⁵ The spiritual eating of Christ by faith, which John 6 teaches, is not limited just to the Supper, but certainly it should be with the oral eating of the Sacrament.⁵⁶ In fact, "the *sedes* for spiritual manducation is in this sixth chapter of John, for

⁵³Sasse, *This is My Body*, 202.

⁵⁴*Letter to the Christians at Strousburg*, (1524), LW 40:68.

⁵⁵"There is no doubt that there is some relationship and connection between the words of institution and John 6." Chemnitz, *The Lord's Supper*, 237.

⁵⁶Luther responds at Marburg: "We do not deny the spiritual eating; on the contrary, we teach and believe it to be necessary. But from this it does not follow that the bodily eating is either useless or unnecessary. We have the command 'Take, eat; this is my body'. It is not our business to judge whether it is useful or not. . . . If he ordered me to eat dung, I would do it." Sasse, *This is My Body*, 191.

sacramental manducation, the words of institution.”⁵⁷ A “spiritual eating” sounds suspicious and un-Lutheran, but this has always been taught as necessary for a beneficial reception of the Supper. Without this teaching, the Roman teaching which denigrates faith and Christ’s works would have won over. John 6 is important for the Supper because it speaks of faith which receives the benefits of Christ.

The Lutheran Confessions state that there are two types of eating. After discussing I Cor. 11:27, the *sedes* for unworthy eating in the Supper, the spiritual eating of Christ by faith is explained:

So there is a twofold eating of Christ’s flesh. First, there is a spiritual kind of eating, which Christ treats above all in John 6. This occurs in no other way than with the Spirit and faith in the proclamation of and meditation on the gospel, as well as in the Supper. It is in and of itself useful, salutary, and necessary for all Christians at all times for their salvation. Without this spiritual reception even the sacramental or oral eating in the Supper is not only not salutary but also harmful and damning.

This spiritual eating, however, is nothing other than faith—namely, hearkening to, accepting with faith, and applying to ourselves God’s Word, which presents Christ to us as true God and a true human being along with all his benefits (God’s grace, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life). . . . The other kind of eating of Christ’s body is oral or sacramental.⁵⁸

Luther cites Augustine’s dictum: “Why do you make ready your teeth and your stomach? Believe and you have eaten.”⁵⁹ While this accurately describes faith according to John 6, it cannot be applied to the sacramental eating in the Supper, which does require “taking” and “eating.” The benefits, though not the body, of Christ in the Supper are received through the spiritual eating of faith. As Augustine poignantly asserts: “you will understand that His grace is not consumed by tooth-biting.”⁶⁰ The fanatics opposed by Luther accepted the spiritual eating taught in John 6, while they denied the oral eating in the Supper taught in its institution.

On the other hand, the Roman church denied that the eating by faith was necessary for receiving the benefits in the Supper: “If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law do not through the act performed (*ex opere operato*) confer grace, but that faith alone in the

⁵⁷Chemnitz, *Harmonia*, 25.

⁵⁸FC SD VII, 61-62; Kolb-Wengert, 604.

⁵⁹*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36:19.

⁶⁰*Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 27:3.

divine promises suffices to obtain grace, let him be anathema.”⁶¹ Lutherans held the oral eating regardless of faith, but that the Supper is not beneficial without faith. In the Roman view, the sacraments are automatic grace dispensers and ultimately a work done by the recipient. This however denies justification by faith alone and turns the Supper into a work intended to earn grace. In opposition, Heb. 4:2 reads: “For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.”

The essence of the Sacrament remains unchanged by the recipient, but the benefit is only received by faith. “Therefore as much difference as there is between an external ceremony of labor and internal faith of the heart, so much is the difference between the two types of manducation.”⁶² The guilt and harm that comes from unworthy eating in I Cor. 11:27 plays a large role in the Supper. John 6:53 is an absolute statement: “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.” Doctrinally, Luther could not apply this to the Supper, because the Supper is not meant for all.⁶³

Some persons, to be sure, have misapplied these words in their teaching concerning the sacrament, as in the decretal *Dudum* and many others. But it is one thing to misapply the Scriptures and another to understand them in their proper sense. Otherwise, if this passage were enjoining a sacramental eating, when he says: ‘Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you,’ he would be condemning all infants, all the sick, and those absent or in any way hindered from the sacramental eating, however strong their faith might be.⁶⁴

Despite a denial of its literal significance for the Supper, John 6 does play a role in the Lutheran theology of the Supper. This discourse of Jesus is centered on faith in Christ, without which the Supper is “harm and damnation.”⁶⁵

⁶¹Council of Trent, Canon VIII, quoted in Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer, vol. 2 (St. Louis: CPH, 1978), 81.

⁶²Chemnitz, *Harmonia*, 26.

⁶³The Eastern Orthodox church communes infants based on this verse, but infants cannot “take and eat,” so they deny the institution by giving only the wine.

⁶⁴Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), 36:19-20.

⁶⁵“Of course, it is true that those who despise the sacrament and lead unchristian lives receive it to their harm and damnation.” LC 5, 69; Kolb-Wengert, 474.

Historical Context of John 6

The following close reading of John 6 will rely on textual evidence available to all readers, not just those from certain backgrounds or with a particular hermeneutic. Luther's 21 sermons, preached from 1530-1531, provide rich material to flesh out the meaning of Christ's discourse. This reading will assume the integrity of the text and its status as a doctrinal norm. Modern critical concerns will not be addressed. The purpose of this close reading is to show that Luther's interpretation of John 6 is correct, in that it expresses what Jesus taught. This is best proved by illustrating the usefulness and suitability of this interpretation for Gospel proclamation within the church. A hoard of negative, logical arguments or assumptions, will not be productive, if the true meaning of God's Word remains inaccessible.

Verses 1-14 of chapter 6 relate the feeding of the 5000. The historical facts of the first audience are related, which are integral to the latter parts of John 6.

¹After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias.

²Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased. ³And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near.

Due to the Passover, a large number of visitors had come for the feast. The audience is Jewish, which is quite significant, in light of Jesus' later words.

The reason why the great crowd came to Jesus is given. They beheld the signs which Christ had done over the sick (ἐθεώρουν τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐποίησεν ἐπὶ τῶν ἀσθενούντων). The Jews saw the signs as a spectacle, not as indicators of Jesus' divinity. This explains the almost antagonistic attitude of Jesus toward the crowds later. Jesus first tests Philip, one of the twelve.

⁵Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?' ⁶But this He said to test [πειράζων] him, for He Himself knew what He would do. ⁷Philip answered Him, 'Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little.'

Jesus presents a problem without an earthly solution. To test or tempt (πειράζω) is used both in a good and bad sense. Divine testing is always meant for good, not to cause one to fall.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ "Examine [πειράζατε] yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know

After the five loaves and two fish are found, Jesus performs the great sign:

¹⁰Then Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. ¹¹And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, “Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost.” ¹³Therefore they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.”

We know from Mark 6:34 that Jesus did more than just the miracle: “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.”

The result of this miracle was not faith in Jesus the Son of God. Only teaching and the promise of the Gospel create faith. Miracles performed for the hardened in heart only confirmed their unbelief.

¹⁵Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.

They saw Jesus in purely earthly terms, because they had their bellies filled. Though Jesus was really a king, He did not come to setup an earthly kingdom. Instead, He came to deliver us from sin and win us a heavenly kingdom: “Jesus said [to Pilate], ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place’” (John 18:36). That the Jews were willing to steal or kidnap (ἄρπάξεν) Jesus, shows their hardness. As a good preacher, Jesus prepares them for the Gospel with difficult and challenging law.

Later that night Jesus came to His disciples on the sea of Galilee by walking on the water (v16-21).⁶⁷ Both Matthew and Mark have Jesus walking on water the evening after He fed the 5000, agreeing with the chronological order of John. John is the only Gospel to include the precious teaching of Jesus who is the bread of life.

yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified” II Cor. 13:5. See also Heb 11:17.

⁶⁷This account in John is shorter than the accounts in Matt. 14:22-32, Mark 6:45-51, and Luke 9:10-17. Peter’s attempt to walk on water is only mentioned in Matthew.

The Bread from Heaven

²²On the following day, when the people who were standing on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other boat there, except that one which His disciples had entered, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with His disciples, but His disciples had gone away alone—²³however, other boats came from Tiberias, near the place where they ate bread after the Lord had given thanks—²⁴when the people therefore saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they also got into boats and came to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. ²⁵And when they found Him on the other side of the sea they said to Him, “Rabbi, when did You come here?”

The people sense that Jesus has arrived in Capernaum in miraculous fashion.⁶⁸ Yet, Jesus does not answer their question. He instead goes on the offensive. Verse 59 discloses the physical location of the discourse: “He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.” The text indicates a continuity of audience, which is why pre-modern interpreters called v25-59 a single sermon.

The Christ shows the thoughts of the Jews’ heart:

²⁶Jesus answered them and said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled [ἐχορτάσθητε].
²⁷Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.”

Jesus to these Jews is an ATM machine. They do not care about His person or work. “Jesus drives home [his point] by using the coarse word χορτάζω, from χόρτος, fodder or hay; they were satisfied like the ox when his belly is full of fodder.”⁶⁹ These desires of the flesh lead only to death, so Jesus instructs them about a better “work” or “food.”⁷⁰ He attempted to redirect their earthly minds in His sermon. “Even today the Gospel finds disciples who imagine that its teachings affords nothing but a gratification of the belly, that it brings all manner of earthly delights, and that it serves solely the wants of this temporal life.”⁷¹

⁶⁸“And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day” Matt. 11:23.

⁶⁹R. C. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 450.

⁷⁰“For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things” Phil. 3:18-20.

⁷¹Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:5.

There is another kind of food that Jesus offers them. He uses their fleshly language and thoughts of daily bread against them. “When the people followed the Lord merely hoping again to eat and drink, as the Lord himself charges them with doing, he took the figure from the temporal food they sought, and speaks throughout the entire chapter of a spiritual food.”⁷² The feeding of the 5000 shows Jesus’ contextualization: He focuses on their sin (wanting bread) and directs them to a imperishable bread, that is, Himself. Because the Father set His seal on the Son, He gives eternal life. The person and work of Jesus is the bread of life.

²⁸Then they said to Him, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?”
²⁹Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.” ³⁰Therefore they said to Him, “What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? ³¹Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”
³²Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

The first audience and historical context is important. Jesus, the superlative preacher, uses their thoughts and words against them. The Jews know their father, Moses, gave manna to eat. They suggest this, because that is what they want: a continual supply of daily bread. But the “work” is not something they can do. What men spend their life for, earthly bread, will not keep them from dying. So also, all works of the flesh are death. “The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6). To believe is not a work—it is to rely on Jesus’ work. Here (v29) Jesus interprets the heavenly bread and how it is received: “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”

Heaven has two meanings. It can mean the created sky (Gen 1:1) or the “abode of God.”⁷³ The heavenly manna, by itself, did not bring the Israelites closer to God or forgive their sins. Jesus declares Himself the true bread from Heaven. But the Jews do not get this point: “they regard the Gospel as a belly sermon.”⁷⁴ But Jesus states His salvific work. He came from the true heaven and “gives life to the world” (v33). This is a universal, life-giving food.

⁷²Luther, *Complete Sermons*, 2.1:402.

⁷³“οὐρανός” *A Manual Lexicon of the New Testament*, G. Abbott-Smith (Aberdeen, Great Britain: The University Press, 1956), 328.

⁷⁴Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:5.

³⁴Then they said to Him, “Lord, give us this bread always.” ³⁵And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. ³⁶But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. ³⁷All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. ³⁸For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. ³⁹This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. ⁴⁰And 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.

“Here Christ places two types of food side by side: the perishable and the eternal.”⁷⁵ The Jews chose the inferior bread. Only one bread will not leave you hungry, Jesus says. The “food” and “bread” metaphor is mixed with another metaphor: “to drink,” which is signified by “thirst” (v35).⁷⁶ The “eating” metaphor, stated explicitly later, is only hinted at now. These metaphors are not new, but reference the Old Testament.⁷⁷ In the Beatitudes, Jesus spoke of a different kind of eating: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6). People “come” (v37) to Jesus by “believing” (v35-36), so that Jesus interprets Himself clearly: to “believe” is to “come.” But earthly minds cannot stand such heavenly teaching. Even Jesus’ own disciples had not understood the sign of the multiplying of the fish and loaves. Mark relates right after Jesus climbed in the boat, after the stilling of the storm, that “They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened” (6:51b-52).

In view of their coarse way of thinking, Christ adds a commentary. He puts the subject before them in puzzling words. Without such crude and strange expressions it would be impossible to tear the thoughts of these coarse sows and bellies away from the idea of gluttony and carousing. Thus the Lord resorts to this manner of speech before these rude Jews that they might tell themselves: “The Lord means to say to us that ‘to come to Him’ and ‘to eat the bread of life’ is ‘to believe in Him,’ and that he who believes in Him comes to Him and eats Him.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:9.

⁷⁶“On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them’” John 7:37-38.

⁷⁷Is. 25: “On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.” This passage is about swallowing “up death forever,” not simply a fancy meal with expensive wines. See also Amos 8:11; Proverbs 9:5.

⁷⁸Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:43.

Jesus tells them they have seen but do not believe (v36). He explains that belief is not a work that man can do. The Father must draw the one who comes to Jesus. Luther rightly concludes that Jesus is preaching against works righteousness. “The text deals with the work that we are to perform, namely, believe. Faith is a work that man must do, and yet it is also called the work of God; for this is the true existence, work, life, and merit with which God desires to be honored and served. If there is no faith, God accepts nothing as service rendered to Him.”⁷⁹

Jesus teaches a comforting doctrine, yet Jesus is seen by the Jews as merely a baker and cook. All who are drawn, “Jesus will by no means cast out.” He will keep all who believe safe until the last day when He will raise them up. v40 restates the theme of this sermon. Jesus consoles consciences and makes law-bound works worthless.⁸⁰ When we believe in Jesus, we have the Father and the Son. “Therewith Christ takes away all the wrath, anger, enmity, and disfavor of God, certifying that neither He nor the Father will cast us out or reject us. Then we can stand our ground when a bad conscience assails us, and not say: ‘I have lived a holy life.’”⁸¹ The “seeing” of Christ is not done with the eyes, but with faith.

Escalation of the Metaphors

Jesus has not spoken up to this point in difficult language, but in clear words. The unspiritual flesh cannot accept the things of God, though. He plainly interpreted Himself as the “bread from heaven,” that is, the Son of God. The Jews begin to understand Jesus—that He is pointing to Himself.

⁴¹The Jews then complained about Him, because He said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven.” ⁴²And they said, “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’?” ⁴³Jesus therefore answered and said to them, “Do not murmur among yourselves. ⁴⁴No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁴⁵It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father

⁷⁹Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:23.

⁸⁰Luther states how necessary this teaching is: “I am already addicted to the belief that God must be wrathful; and then these people come along and teach us to appease the anger of God with good works.” Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:59.

⁸¹Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:64.

comes to Me. ⁴⁶Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father.

They see Jesus and witnessed the miracle of the loaves, but do not “see” Him in faith. His background, family, and wealth are not indicative of someone who has seen the Father. Jesus shows them by His teaching that though they wanted to make Him a king, they despise Him. And by doing so they reject the Father who sent Him. Jesus answers what were likely private complaints. He says: “Of course, you cannot understand, the Father has not drawn you. How could you?” This teaching cannot be understood by natural reason, God Himself must teach it to hearts.⁸²

In external and worldly matters let reason be the judge. . . . But in heavenly matters and matters of faith, when a question of salvation is involved, bid reason observe silence and hold still. Do not apply the yardstick of reason, but give ear and say: Here I cannot do it; these matters do not agree with reason as do the things mentioned above. Therefore you must hold your reason in check and say: I do not know; I will not try to figure it out or measure it with my understanding, but I will keep still and listen; for this is immeasurable and incomprehensible to reason.⁸³

Even sanctified reason is not qualified to judge in matters of faith. God’s Word must be our guide.

⁴⁷Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. ⁵⁰This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I 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.

No earthly bread, including the bread of the Lord’s Supper, can give life without this bread from heaven, that is, life in Christ. “Here Christ is not speaking of the Sacrament but of those who are to live eternally. Many flock to the Lord’s Table, and yet they die of eternal hunger and thirst.”⁸⁴ The spiritual and the physical are not to be divided in the Supper. The Jews who ate the manna serve as an example.

⁸²“The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit” I Cor. 2:14.

⁸³Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:84.

⁸⁴Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:46.

Jesus says the bread is His flesh, meaning, His own person. God is flesh and blood to be eaten by faith. To partake of this bread is to possess eternal life. Jesus, for the first time in the discourse, talks of eating the bread. Jesus' metaphorical language becomes more extreme. "We do not partake of eternal life by virtue of our works but solely by faith. Faith is the true partaking and eating of eternal life."⁸⁵ It is a continuous eating that does not leave one hungry or thirsty. "For the eating of John 6 is always and by all people done unto salvation."⁸⁶

His flesh is what He gives "for the life of the world." A sacramental reading might miss the reference to the atonement here. "To *give one's flesh* can only mean death, and Jesus adds that his death will be both voluntary (*I will give*) and vicarious."⁸⁷ This is reminiscent of what John the Baptist said of Jesus: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Christ gave His body, but to more than 5000, in order to fill and sustain all the world to eternity.

Jesus accused the Jews and offended their godless sensibilities.

⁵²The Jews therefore quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" ⁵³Then Jesus said to them, "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."⁵⁴Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

Here we have the famous source of the "Capernaite eating." The Jews in Capernaum, while listening to Jesus, thought of literally gnawing on Jesus' flesh and bones. Therefore "Capernaite eating" stands for the physical eating of Jesus' flesh. Lutherans rejected that the Supper included this kind of eating.⁸⁸

We hereby completely condemn the Capernaite eating of the body of Christ. It suggests that his flesh is chewed up with the teeth and digested like other food. . . . On the contrary, on the basis of the simple words of Christ's testament, we hold and teach the true, but supernatural, eating of the body of Christ and the drinking of

⁸⁵Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:111.

⁸⁶"But in the Supper many people eat judgment to themselves and in the eating become guilty of the body of Christ." Chemnitz, *The Lord's Supper*, 238.

⁸⁷Guyette, 242.

⁸⁸"In making John 6 a discourse on faith . . . flesh is replaced by a purely allegorical interpretation in which these words are given a different meaning." David Scaer, "Once More to John 6," 232-33. This misses the point that unless one takes the Supper as physical cannibalism, this passage is not literally sacramental either.

his blood. Human reason and understanding cannot grasp this, but our understanding must be taken captive by obedience to Christ here as in all other articles of faith. Such a mystery cannot be grasped except by faith alone and is revealed alone in the Word.⁸⁹

The eating in the Supper is neither physical (what the Jews in John 6 thought), nor spiritual (what Jesus actually taught), but “sacramental.” Based on Christ’s institution, the sacramental eating resides in its own category.⁹⁰

Sacramental interpretations are based on the similarity of these verses to the words of institution. But flesh (σάρξ) and body (σῶμα) are quite different terms. In the Supper we do not eat the “flesh” of Christ, but His “body.” Without doubt this demand to eat flesh and blood would be quite offensive to Jewish ears. “I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from the people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life” (Lev. 17:10-11). Jesus’ congregation misses the point that His blood must be shed to make atonement for them. They do not eat this saving doctrine, but lose their appetite.

Flesh and blood together make a whole person. With these words Jesus escalates the metaphoric language of “bread” and “eating.” In v54 Jesus even uses a different word for “eating” (τρῶγω). This word is used properly of animals and means “to gnaw, munch, crunch.” When used of men it usually means to eat raw food, such as vegetables or nuts.⁹¹ Jesus presses home the point that outside of Christ’s body there is no life.⁹² Therefore, they are to “eat” Him, not just nibble or pick at His teaching. He invites His hearers to devour Him, that is, take Him to heart, because He is life and salvation.

⁸⁹FC Ep VII, 42; Kolb-Wengert, 508.

⁹⁰“For human reason neither knows nor understands any other kind of eating except the physical and gross eating by which the flesh of cattle is eaten or a cow eats hay. But because this kind of eating cannot and must not be attributed to or believed of the body of Christ without danger to our faith, they think it follows from this that there is only a spiritual eating of the body of Christ in the Supper, because they are unwilling to grant any third kind of eating between the physical and the spiritual.” Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Supper*, 57.

⁹¹“τρῶγω” *A Manual Lexicon*, 452.

⁹²“For with the words ‘It is My flesh’ He draws a line of demarcation between this and all other bodies and flesh.” Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:132.

Jesus has dissuaded them from a false Gospel which only fills the belly. In their rebellion against God, they leave Christ, wanting nothing to do with Him, even though He did miracles before them. They regard Him as a crazy man.

⁵⁵For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. ⁵⁶He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. ⁵⁷As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. ⁵⁸This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum.

These words conclude Jesus’ public sermon. Jesus taught similarly elsewhere about the food He offers, but nowhere does He emphasize so strongly that it must be possessed or else hell and damnation wait. In John 4:31-34 Jesus teaches that His work is more valuable than food for the stomach. “Meanwhile his disciples urged him, ‘Rabbi, eat something.’ But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you know nothing about.’ Then his disciples said to each other, ‘Could someone have brought him food?’ ‘My food,’ said Jesus, ‘is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.’” “He makes it as clear as anyone could, so that they should not even imagine a reference to any object other than that which they see before their eyes, He is speaking of Himself. He does this because they do not desist from their spiritual flitting about.”⁹³

Jesus’ audience, and their reaction, explains the harsh language that offends reason. Jesus is talking to Jews who sought to have their bellies filled and nothing else. “He addresses these words to all, particularly to all hypocrites.”⁹⁴ The Lord’s Supper is not the doctrine coarse unbelievers need to hear. Rather, that apart from this “eating” of Christ by faith they have only sin and death.

⁶⁰Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, “This is a hard saying; who can understand it?” ⁶¹When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶²What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? ⁶³It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. ⁶⁴But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. ⁶⁵And He said,

⁹³Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:118.

⁹⁴Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:127.

“Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.”⁶⁶ From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.⁶⁷ Then Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also want to go away?”⁶⁸ But Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.⁶⁹ Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”⁷⁰ Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?”⁷¹ He spoke of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, for it was he who would betray Him, being one of the twelve.

This section marks a change in setting. No longer is Jesus speaking to the unbelieving Jews in the Synagogue.⁹⁵ Jesus did not intentionally offend and drive away, given His willingness to die for all sinners. He argues that seeing Him ascend into heaven would be more offensive than believing that He came from heaven as “bread” for the world.⁹⁶ The sacramentarians who denied the literal meaning of the words of institution staked their claim on v63, claiming that even Christ’s body would not profit one.⁹⁷ But flesh in v63 is man’s flesh as opposed to when Jesus said: “the bread that I shall give is My flesh” (v51). In Christ, “God is present wherever this flesh and blood are present.”⁹⁸ It is a living flesh. The flesh described by Jesus in v63 is the flesh opposed to the spirit, that is, the sinful part of man.

How do we eat and believe the Son and be drawn to the Father? This very teaching delivers Christ and all His benefits. Faith lays hold of Christ who is delivered in the Word. “The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (v63b). Jesus laid out the banquet of grace in His sermon before the Jews, just as surely as He gave them loaves and fish to eat. But they could not bear His teaching which delivers from death and is food itself, even after they had stuffed themselves with earthly food. “It is peculiar and strange that those who are close to Christ, are called His disciples, preach in His name, and perhaps also work miracles are offended by this sermon, fall away, and cannot bear to hear Him say: ‘He who believes in Me will be saved.’”⁹⁹ Man is addicted to doing works for God’s favor and cannot eat the bread of life without being

⁹⁵ “Christ preached this sermon in Capernaum, in His church, where He was chief superintendent, in His pulpit, where He was a doctor and preacher, where His disciples heard many of His excellent sermons.” Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:156.

⁹⁶ The offense cannot be solely that Jesus gives His body and blood. To accept the Supper one must believe that Jesus, the Son of God, died for sins. “Reason is offended at these words and finds them intolerable.” Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:132.

⁹⁷ Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:165-166.

⁹⁸ Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:130.

⁹⁹ Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:157.

drawn.¹⁰⁰ Peter, on the other hand, gives a most appropriate amen to this sermon: “There is no where else to go. Your words are difficult, but they offer eternal life.”¹⁰¹ Peter ate, while Judas held to a false Gospel.

Theological Conclusions

While it might be tempting to make John 6 a polemical text against those who deny the Sacrament, to do so is to misappropriate it and twist its sense. Some would say there is warrant to find the sacraments everywhere, even where the words of Scripture do not indicate it. But which Christ is being sought then? The One who speaks in Scripture, which is His Word, or one that is derived from man’s own imagination and vain speculation?¹⁰² There is a danger in being more sacramental than Christ Himself.¹⁰³

In John 6, Jesus was speaking to people outside the faith, not to those who believe in Him. Handling Christ’s flesh did not help those without faith in His life-giving words. The faithful believers in the Old Testament possessed Christ through the promise. They did not have the Supper, but abided in Him, nonetheless.

This universal and absolute statement will allow no conditions or qualifications at all: “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.” To give out the Supper is not the same thing as to give out life. Else public, open communion would be the greatest evangelism tool. But those who are drawn by the spiritual word about Christ, then have the opportunity to eat Christ orally. The two different kinds of eating of Christ are hopefully simultaneous, but must be distinguished. Many are not able to eat physical bread, but Christ gave His flesh for the world that all would eat Him by

¹⁰⁰ “You assume that faith is your doing, your power, your work; and thereby you interfere with God’s work.” Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:181.

¹⁰¹ “Any understanding of these words that I hear must be wrought in me by the Holy Spirit. He makes me spiritual too. The Word is spiritual, and I also become spiritual; for He inscribes it in my heart, and then, in brief, all is Spirit.” Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:175.

¹⁰² “You must cling to His Word. They, however, would pass judgment on Scripture and say: ‘That is true, and that is false.’ In brief you must become God’s pupil. If God does not grant you the Word and faith, you will not believe it.” Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:103.

¹⁰³ “God ends up playing the role of pupil to all men. But we will see what they gain from correcting God.” Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:79.

faith.¹⁰⁴ God's love in Jesus is still present when a feeding tube is ineffective and the stomach is incapacitated—the believer stills eats the bread of life and lives eternally.

Christianity is not solely a sacramental and ritualistic religion: access to physical, holy objects do not automatically grant life.¹⁰⁵ Luther granted that the Roman church had the sacraments, but lamented that they did not have the Gospel. Without preaching to proclaim the promises of Christ in them, the sacramental rites are unfruitful rituals, that is, works. Every religion which guarantees salvation through sacraments *ex opere operato* [by the mere doing of the work itself] is a religion of works. In contrast, Christ says: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” Abiding in Jesus must be God's work, it cannot be man's work.

Even touching the flesh of Christ is not the same as receiving His benefits. “When I touch Him, see Him, and physically crucify Him, as the Jews did, I am touching God, I am seeing God with my physical eyes, and with my physical hands I am crucifying the Son of God; for in Him you will assuredly encounter God, God is in Him personally, though hidden and concealed.”¹⁰⁶ How many touched His flesh and died, just like those who ate the manna? “Did not the accursed Jews crucify Christ and yet through the handling of this life-giving flesh were not made alive in a spiritual way?”¹⁰⁷ One could consume the entire physical body of Jesus, and it would not make one spiritual. Even cannibalism of Christ's flesh would not give life. “His grace is not consumed by tooth-biting.”¹⁰⁸

For Augustine and Luther the woman with the issue of blood was a strong parallel to John

¹⁰⁴Pastor David Petersen highlights a burgeoning interest in infant communion among Lutherans: “For years a friend of mine and I have liked to speculate about what the next generation of LC-MS confessionals will find disgusting in us. . . . My prediction: infant communion. This is the issue. I don't want to deal with it, but I can't get away from it. Where it will land I don't know.” Blog post from “Cyberstones-A Lutheran Blog,” March 30, 2007 <http://www.redeemer-fortwayne.org/blog.php?msg=6267>. He strangely calls what all Lutherans have done (not commune infants) an “enlightenment practice of communing only adults.” I Cor. 11:27-29 will not allow such a stance in Luther's view. Will the assumed symbolism of John 6 play the lead role in future reflection on the Supper, instead of the clear passages found elsewhere in Scripture? The interpretation of Scripture does ultimately affect the theological outcome.

¹⁰⁵“Paul's warning against unworthy eating [I Cor. 11:27-30] is precisely to safeguard against a brand of Christianity that rests on the sure possession of infallibly operating sacraments.” Hermann Sasse, *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*, vol 1, trans. Matthew Harrison (St. Louis: CPH, 2001), 410.

¹⁰⁶Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:104.

¹⁰⁷Gerhard, *A Comprehensive Explanation*, 455.

¹⁰⁸Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 27:3.

6.¹⁰⁹ She touched Jesus and was healed. But many others had touched Jesus also and were still under condemnation. But this was a physical touching combined with faith: “If only I may touch His clothes, I shall be made well.” “His disciples said to Him, ‘You see the multitude thronging You, and You say, “Who touched Me?” ’” She believed His Word and also touched Jesus’ garment. “And He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction.’” So also, today those who trust in His works and have peace with the Father are closer to Jesus than many who touched His flesh. That is what it means to eat Christ by faith.

On the other hand, we dare not say the body and blood of Christ in the Supper are useless. It is one powerful and immediate way the Gospel and Christ are delivered. But without the preaching of the Gospel, the Sacrament becomes a magic rabbit’s foot making one worthy of heaven, not a gracious invitation to faith and forgiveness. Without the eating of Christ by faith, the Sacrament is of no use, even though Christ is present there. Having Jesus preach in their Synagogue did not profit the Jews either.

The sacramental interpretation of John may cause the most harm by belittling faith in Christ. “Christ is speaking here of the chief doctrine, of the true Christian faith, which demands no more and no less than that you believe in his flesh and blood.”¹¹⁰ Christ, that is His life-giving flesh, given unto death for the world is the proper object of faith. The Lord’s Supper is not where our salvation was won, but it does apply the benefits of the Lord’s passion to us. Christ is in the Supper, but without spiritual eating He will not help us.¹¹¹ As many ate the manna and died, many eat and drink to their condemnation in the Supper.¹¹² “He who believes in Me has everlasting life” (v47).

¹⁰⁹Mark 5:25-34. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 26:3.

¹¹⁰Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530-31), LW 23:118.

¹¹¹The difficulty in preaching is not to mention the sacraments many times, but to preach them as Gospel, that is, to proclaim them as promises to *believe in*, which Christ won by His own death.

¹¹²“The sacrament is one thing, the virtue of the sacrament another. How many do receive at the altar and die, and die indeed by receiving? Whence the apostle says, eats and drinks judgment to himself.” Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 26:11.

Conclusion

John 6, a well-trod hermeneutical battlefield, is unique in several ways. First, the deniers of the Supper tried to make it more important than the words of institution. Second, most modern interpreters of this text have denied the unity of this passage, and therefore also any real chance of listening to Jesus. “If in this first part of this discourse Jesus calls himself the bread of life, while in verse 51b he speaks of his flesh and blood, it is neither necessary nor possible to harmonize this, as the exegetes of the 16th and 17th centuries did.”¹¹³ Even the most conservative theologians today see Scripture as so fractured it cannot be understood as a totality. To do so in John 6 is to say the words purportedly from Jesus’ lips are not really His. Can we know reliably who Jesus is and what He said? Not without God’s actual words in Scripture. No other interpretation of John 6 can give such a unified explanation for Jesus’ most unusual and edifying sermon. Because His words are Spirit and life, we should listen carefully to Him and put aside what we think Jesus should say. “In these words the soul finds a well prepared table, at which it satisfies all hunger; for it knows a certainty that he who speaks cannot lie.”¹¹⁴

If we differ from Luther’s interpretation, we should ask ourselves: have we read the text and considered its doctrinal connections more carefully than him or do we have modern critical assumptions on the nature of Scripture which allow us to read into the text what we wish to see?

¹¹³Sasse, *This is My Body*, 144.

¹¹⁴Luther, *Complete Sermons*, 2.1:401.