

# **Twice More to John 6:**

## **An Analysis of the Sacramental Interpretation**

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John 6 is a controversial touchstone because it is here that different understandings and methods of interpretation meet so concretely. Both Charles Gieschen and David Scaer, from their essays in the January/April 2014 CTQ, have similar views of the text, though they argue in different ways [Gieschen, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the Gospel of John,” 23-45; Scaer, “Once More to John 6,” 47-62]. The result appears to be in line with Lutheran theology, but the interpretation itself is not historically Lutheran. This is due to modern assumptions and approaches to Scripture and the interpretive task. This essay seeks only to analyze the arguments, not to present a full understanding of the text.

A sacramental reading of John 6 is not too dangerous in itself. Many laymen have mistakenly thought the same, just by hearing the words “eat,” “drink,” “flesh [though not body],” and “blood.” That is not doing solid theology or taking Scripture seriously as a doctrinal foundation though. But what is perplexing is that many fail to see a radically different understanding of Scripture behind the now commonplace view of John 6. It really is a much bigger issue than a few verses or a chapter. There is a reason no orthodox Lutheran theologian saw John 6 as sacramental before the acceptance of historical criticism in the 1800’s. What is the reason behind this powerful fact? They read Scripture differently.

The underlying assumptions are what drive the differing interpretations. What are the presuppositions of the sacramental reading? “If one understands Jesus’ discourses in this gospel as sermons that John delivered to the post-Easter church that was baptized and celebrating the Lord’s Supper weekly, then it is easier to understand how these discourses communicate about the sacraments” [25]. The argument that John 6 is about the Supper is extra-biblical, not from the text itself. It is presupposed that “the Gospels are not diaries but post-resurrection, interpretive, theological commentaries” [54].

But, since all the words in the text are attributed to Jesus, at what point does the different audience come in at? While this interpretation is reasonable to many, they fail to see why modern scholars press the issue so hard. It has emerged as the test case for their critical view of Scripture. A sermon or commentary is an application or reflection on the Word of God. But is not all Scripture the Word of God?

In both essays a radically different view of Scripture is assumed. An “episode or statement of Jesus was deliberately chosen in order to call these sacraments to mind” [25]. This refers to the redactor [editor] of the gospel, and this type of interpretation is called redaction criticism. The gospels especially came to be seen in the 1960’s as narrow theological documents (“sermons” or “commentaries”) of a theologian, rather than the universal Word of God. The context of Scripture was severely limited. Scholars insisted they were written by sophisticated writers, not necessarily by the Spirit for all times, addressing a very specific historical context (1st century), apart from which they cannot be understood. So it is not that the early Lutherans were “cutting their losses” [49]. Rather, they actually took the words at face value and submitted to the text as to God, apart from any assumed context or historical criticism.

Modern readers ostensibly determined to find the sacraments in every passage fail to read the whole chapter as a coherent historical narrative. There is a theological unity between John 6 and the Lord’s Supper, for it speaks of Christ’s divinity and atonement of mankind. The same Christ who died and rose gives His body and blood in the Supper. All doctrine is related dogmatically. But careless exegesis short circuits the theological task by looking for code words pointing outside the text itself. This critical method, though not necessarily its conclusions, devalue the words given by God and the authority of our doctrine by simply assuming the truth. If the Scriptures are mere commentaries on God’s Word, how are they also that very Word? A presumed distinction is made between the “direct Word of God” and apostolic commentary on that Word of God [Scaer, *Apostolic Scriptures*, (CPH 1971), 51.]

“*Redaktionsgeschichte* [Redaction criticism] puts the emphasis on the writer[s] [redactors of the materials]” ... “who deliberately set forth their material in such a way as to teach a given theological position” [*Apostolic Scriptures*, 62]. Exegesis then becomes an excavation of individual (previously assumed) themes and emphases from the redactor’s theological and historical context, rather than a drawing out of all teaching from the single source of God’s Word. While the results in the LCMS have not been as caustic or un-theological as for the liberal scholars, this approach does undermine Scripture as the basis for all doctrine.

This new view of the Bible allows for hidden or novel interpretations, not provable by the text itself. Words like “symbolic” or “undertones” are used. Conjecture and speculation are then objectified and “scriptural,” so the actual text itself is seen as unstable and indefinite. The reasoning goes: a few words of John 6:52-58 sound like the sacramental words, therefore they must be about the Sacrament. The focus is on key words and extra-biblical data, so that the meaning is obvious even apart from the context. The basic argument is that the context of John 6 is the early church, not the words or history given in the text. Luther went to the text and saw an accurate reporting of Jesus’ dialogue with unbelieving Jews who merely wanted bread from Jesus. These two CTQ articles barely address the text, the content of John 6. How can one disprove what is not there for sure in the first place? The sacramental view deals with the scriptural meaning as shadows and images, not the plain truth of Christ—the bread of life who died for all men.

So John 6 addresses a hypothetical problem of the early Church, but one not mentioned by the text. “Could John have confronted a similar problem: Christians denying the Son of God in the flesh by abstaining from the Lord’s Supper and then leaving?” [43]. Did Jesus feed the 5000 and address the Jews’ unbelief in rather harsh words to speak to later Christians about avoiding communion? Only if John is more a creative author than a simple narrator who is concerned about historical accuracy. Luther’s chronological argument (that the Supper was not yet instituted) assumed that John 6 was reliable history in every sense. This novel approach raises the question: Did John forge Jesus’ words to give this “secret” message about the Supper? It is contrary to the idea of a historical narrative. If a newspaper article was written with hidden undertones of the truth in this manner, we would call it a lie. But God does not lie or deceive—men do.

Luther did not just take a polemical stance on this text. He preached extensively and positively on it. To accuse him of doing otherwise is dishonest. He could say, “Thus saith the Lord.” But here in these two articles we have “if’s” and hypotheses and unproved “rules of interpretation.” For Luther the text was bigger than him. It was not an academic question, but God’s own Word that dare not be played with as a “chessboard” [62]. Luther was not “cutting his losses” or equivocating due to ecumenical concerns [49]. His hand was not forced by anything other than God’s Word. Luther was not the compromising type. Scripture is bigger than us and our desire for a clearer and more direct word—it is God’s speech to us.

Luther, when he makes his “either-or” argument about John 6 being sacramental, is accused of being “purely Zwinglian.” This disrespect of Luther is shameful. Luther was not backed into a corner by this

text, rather his exegetical position on John 6 was firmly fixed from 1520, before the sacramentarian controversy [52; *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, LW 36:19]. He preached many sermons on it over decades. They were positive, Gospel-filled sermons, not simply polemical diatribes. “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.” [Scaer, 62]. How can anyone know Luther’s supposed exegetical intuition, when he spoke so vehemently against what these articles propose? This is a poor way of arguing and no words of Luther are even enlisted.

The root of this sacramental interpretation is actually a modern, historical-critical method of interpreting the Word of God. But Luther had no such sophistication—clear Scripture was the basis for his doctrine. This is the real reason Luther held to his view on John 6, despite the disparagement of modern scholars: Luther was compelled by the text. In stark contrast, modern “interpreters of this discourse must be aware that they are interpreting not only what the original speaker (i.e., Jesus) was communicating to the original audience (i.e., Jews and disciples of Jesus), but primarily what the author (i.e., John) was communicating to his readers (i.e., post-Easter Christians)” [37]. The question of authorship is the issue. Did John “author” Jesus’ words, that is, falsify them? Did John modify Jesus’ quotations for his secondary context thereby changing their meaning? How can they still be Jesus’ words if his original words were edited or redacted to say something contrary to their original sense?

Historic Lutheranism took the words at face value. Jesus was speaking to Jews before the Supper was instituted. The text attributes all the speech to Jesus and none to John. Did John overlay the words with symbolic meaning? Redaction criticism claims that he did by changing the original discourses and words, as though he were a theological author in his own right. While it allows for more creativity in interpretation, it is also an indefensibly low view of Scripture. This critical view has been a boon to scholars bored with rigid doctrinal theology and the clear Word of God, but it is dangerous and deceiving when its results are pressed upon the Church.

The real question should be: Is John 6 a plain historical narrative or something else, not indicated by the text? The result of this interpretation is confusion, not clarity: “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. Because the Gospels preserve both earlier and later reflections on the Last Supper, Lutherans and Reformed justified their accommodation as biblical with each other on the Lord’s Supper in the Formula of Agreement” [Scaer, “Reformed Exegesis and Lutheran

Sacraments: Worlds in Conflict,” CTQ 64 (Jan. 2000), no. 1:18-19]. This is a very different underlying view of Scripture, that there are high-level strands or themes woven into the true history and words of Jesus, addressing an unlisted audience. Such a view renders the text uncertain and likely conflicting.

If the Scriptures are *a priori* about the sacramental rites, then of course, any “eating” or “drinking” is sacramental, apart from the context in which those words occur. Must every lunch we digest also be sacramental if we “take it” and “give thanks” via the common table prayer? But how does that help proclamation or faith? The truth is that simply pointing to the outward work of receiving communion is not the Gospel. It fails to do the hard work of telling us why we should want Christ’s body and blood. John 6 does proclaim Christ’s atonement and self-giving for the world. But Communion is not open for all (especially the unbelieving Jews to whom Jesus directs His words) to receive, as is the Gospel. It is the preacher’s job to connect the text and its context to people and then direct them to the Supper in faith, so they desire the forgiveness it offers. This a much more difficult task than simply ripping John 6:53 out of its context by an exegetical sleight of hand.

Contra the misleading argument, John 6 is still figurative, even if it is sacramental [58]. Eating Jesus’ “flesh” is cannibalism, not the Supper, if the text is taken literally. If taking “eating” and “drinking” as faith is “spiritualizing” the text or “allegorical,” so is making it about the Lord’s Supper [57]. The purely physical eating of John 6 is cannibalism, which does not give life. The Lutheran Confessions label this literal view of the Jews in John 6 “the Capernaite eating” and deny that it is the Supper instituted by Jesus. “Hence we hereby utterly reject and condemn the Capernaite eating of the body of Christ, as though we taught that His flesh were rent with the teeth, and digested like other food” [FC Ep VII:42]. So the sacramental reading still takes a figurative, half-allegorical approach, while also leaving behind the stated context (Jews) and the theme (faith) of Jesus’ prior words. It is a forced and inaccurate argument. Eating Jesus’ big toe like an apple is not the same as receiving the Supper for forgiveness. The Lutheran confessions are clear on this, whereas the sacramental-redactionists are vague and equivocating.

What does a sacramental vision of John 6 add to proclamation? Nothing. It merely shows they have found the sacraments that they assumed were there (from the unwritten context). So everything can be “sacramental,” but it will be a generic meaning as presented: “Christians are to see how this meal teaches them about the ongoing presence of the risen Lord, who now prepares and serves his church with the miraculous food of his flesh and blood.” That is exactly the assumed context in the first place: Early Christians are gathered around the Supper! It removes the work of wrestling with faith and the

Gospel, as if Christianity were simply a matter of eating and drinking in outward observance at the right spot. This method of doing theology is inferior to Luther's.

It is boldly stated: "The prologue necessitates that one adopt a sacramental consciousness in order to understand the theology of this Gospel" [59]. But the prologue does not mention the sacraments or any sort of consciousness. The beautiful words of John which speak of the incarnation of our Lord are not a license for a game of hermeneutical "Where's Waldo." Many allusions, encrustments, and themes related to the Sacrament do not profit faith. Firm promises of Christ do, which is what Luther sought. The thesis is unproved, yet it is required of us to "uncover a sacramental interpretation in the very fiber of John's Gospel" [61]. How vague and reductionistic. The logic is: "It must be, even though it doesn't explicitly say, so it really is." It reeks of modern biblical scholasticism, as opposed to the Spirit who leads into certain truth.

"Eucharistic clues," or redaction-critical "droppings" we might say, are seen by those with the correct sacramental "consciousness" [60, 61]. So anything that can remotely be twisted to be about the sacraments is about the sacraments, by theological fiat. No careful reading of Scripture is needed! No wonder we cannot even discuss this passage rationally—the discussion is not about the passage at all. To follow Luther's reasoning is to render these modern Lutherans "amused" and "baffled" [54]. The authority and unity of Scripture is really at stake. The presumed fact that John 6 is so "obviously" about the Sacrament and useful for us today, does not make it true or faithful to the Word of God.

No one can say that John 6 is not about faith. To do so is to call God a liar. The text speaks clearly. v29: "This is the work of God, that you *believe* in him whom he has sent." v35-36: "Jesus said to them, I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever *believes* in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not *believe*." v40: "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and *believes* in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." v47-48: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever *believes* has eternal life. I am the bread of life." There is no break in the text—Jesus continues the sermon to speak of eating His flesh, since He is the bread of life. He escalates the bread of life metaphor for faith in the face of the Jews' offense at Him (so the Gospel becomes the savor of death to them). Contra Luther and the text itself: "There is a distinct shift in the discourse at John 6:51" [38]. Is this from John the "author" or from Jesus the author? How are we to know? Luther's reading of it, available in LW 23 and many sermons in English, demonstrates a more careful attention to the inspired words.

The contrary perspective, as argued, is less forthright and actually somewhat deceiving. It insults

Luther, while not revealing its own playful understanding of this text. It fails to admit that words can be used in many ways. A homily is not strict interpretation. Exegesis is not dogmatics. In Christian freedom, we can use the words of John 6 in ways Jesus did not intend or sanction at all, as long as we don't contradict the Scriptures or change their meaning. We are not bound to speak just like Jesus.

These arguments dismiss Luther and psychoanalyze him as to the reason he could not really be "Lutheran" and read John 6 as sacramental. It is so obvious from this perspective that Luther must have been forced by severe circumstances to be so "Zwinglian." But maybe such scholars in Luther's shoes have not surpassed the master. Luther rebuts: "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" [*Church Postil* 2.1:402].

Again, what is gained by a sacramental reading of John 6? Besides being natural and easy (and requiring almost no interpretive work), what does it contribute to our knowledge? That we should have communion with fish or nothing instead of wine? That Baptism is not enough for infants? Errors have crept in due to emphasizing this misreading of the text, which does not talk about the Lord's Supper at all. It does not say anything definitive about the Supper, even according to the opposition. But what do allusions contribute to faith? They are not solid promises to rely on, but only intellectual hooks upon which to hang what we already know and assume. So John 6 (or really only a few verses) is merely the jumping off point for those who understand the sacramental clues. The real context of it, the feeding of the 5000, the Manna, the Jews wanting a bread-king and not a Savior, become irrelevant. After all, some would argue: "A chronological approach to the Gospel may provide a distorted interpretation" [55]. That is a strange guideline and impossible to prove. While the Gospels are not history books, we must assume that they are accurate where they imply chronological accuracy, if we are to consider them true at all.

Scripture is at stake. This recent sacramental reading of John 6 demands a context outside of Scripture, an unwritten one we can never be sure of. How can we know if we have arrived at a "fuller" reading of the "sacramental overtones," if they are not plainly stated [45]? What if we have faith in Christ for forgiveness, but not the correct sacramental consciousness? Is that the same as the Spirit, who is required to understand Scripture and believe in Christ who is Lord? This redaction-critical method turns the clear and plain Scriptures, which explicitly testify of Christ, into hidden messages containing subtle, unstated themes, which cannot be a reliable foundation for Christ's sure, saving teaching. It obfuscates the Word of God. Not only that, it denies by implication *Sola Scriptura* and its perspicuity,

by necessitating an unknown 1st century context. This disagreement is not over a verse or chapter, but the nature of Scripture and how it should be viewed as authoritative today.