

4-1-2019

The Sacramentality of the "Bread of Life Discourse" in John 6

Anthony Nabor

Pepperdine University, anthony.nabor@pepperdine.edu

Recommended Citation

Nabor, Anthony (2019) "The Sacramentality of the "Bread of Life Discourse" in John 6," *Global Tides*: Vol. 13 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol13/iss1/2>

This Religion is brought to you for free and open access by the Seaver College at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Tides by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact josias.bartram@pepperdine.edu , anna.speth@pepperdine.edu.

The Sacramentality of the "Bread of Life Discourse" in John 6

Anthony Nabor

In the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus issues a challenging teaching to the Jews following him concerning salvation, giving his famous "Bread of Life Discourse" (6:51-58). This sermon not only tested the faith of those following Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem, but has also shaped Christian practice and theology in the two millennia since. While many who read the "Bread of Life Discourse" believe that it concerns the sacrament of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, the passage more likely continues the lesson of the rest of John 6 by emphasizing faith in Jesus through a metaphor. Though the evangelist did not consider chronology in the same way as current readers, the sacramental-sounding language used in the "Bread of Life Discourse" is not in and of itself sufficient to justify a sacramental reading.

Background on John

The Gospel of John is unlike the three Synoptic Gospels in many ways, including the evangelist's writing style, emphasis on the mystical and majestic attributes of Jesus, description of Jesus' teaching style, inclusion of scenes not found in the other Gospels, and exclusion of seemingly important scenes from the other Gospels. In addition to these, John is the only canonical Gospel that claims to be based on the testimony of an eyewitness to Jesus (21:24). Outside of the information provided in this verse, there is very little known about the original author of this Gospel. The matter is further complicated by the fact that the earliest copies of John that we currently possess provide evidence of editing, such as changes in the style of Greek, some stories being told out of order, and the possibility of the addition of new material into the text. While scholarly debate continues over the issue of authorship, this exegetical work will refer to the person responsible for the production of this Gospel by their traditional name "John" or as the Evangelist. The Gospel was likely written in the first century for a community founded by one of Jesus' early followers (see Powell, 2018) and explicitly for the purpose "so that you may come to believe¹ that Jesus is the Messiah,² the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31 NRSV).

¹ Other ancient authorities read *may continue to believe*

² Or *the Christ*

Layout of John 6

The Johannine Jesus often speaks in long and mysterious discourses, such as the “Bread of Life Discourse” found relatively early in the Gospel. The first third of John 6 includes the story of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water. The rest of John 6 is concerned with the “Bread of Life Discourse” and can be further divided into three sections (see LaVerdiere, 1996). In verses 22-51, Jesus premises the “Bread of Life Discourse” by comparing himself to the manna that came down from Heaven for the Jews to eat during their years in the wilderness. Verses 48-58 contain Jesus’ difficult teaching that his followers must eat his flesh and drink his blood. The last verses of the chapter (vv. 59-71) document the response by his disciples, with many choosing to leave Jesus. In this very chapter, the disciples witness the miracles of the feeding of the five thousand and walking on water, yet what Jesus asks of them is so problematic that many think it better to leave.

The Jewish audience that heard this sermon would have considered eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood vulgar (see Haenchen, 1984) and a great sin (see Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:14; 1 Sam. 14:32-34). The Christians that would later read the “Bread of Life Discourse” in John’s Gospel had a different problem – determining whether it should be read sacramentally. In this context, sacramental refers to whether the “Bread of Life Discourse” refers to the Last Supper and applies to the sacrament of the Eucharist³ in contemporary Christian worship.

Reasons for a Sacramental Reading

The Gospel of John’s account of the Last Supper is dissimilar to those found in the Synoptic Gospels in that there are no words of institution for the sacrament of the Eucharist (cf. Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20). Because of this, the “Bread of Life Discourse” is interpreted by many to be the Johannine substitute for the missing words of institution. According to George R. Beasley-Murray (1999), v. 51c⁴ is a “Johannine version of Jesus’ saying about the bread of the Last Supper.” The evidence he uses to support this claim is the parallel language between v. 51c and descriptions of the Last Supper elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24) and that vv. 53-58 introduces a eucharistic formula (see Beasley-Murray).

Raymond Brown’s (1966) argument in support of reading John 6 as part of the Last Supper narrative in John is multi-layered. He, like Beasley-Murray, finds

³ The Eucharist is the Christian rite that involves breaking bread in community with other Christians, done in remembrance of the Last Supper of Jesus

⁴ “and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”

a eucharistic formula in the "Bread of Life Discourse," citing v. 51 instead of vv. 53-58. He writes, "it is possible that we have preserved... the Johannine form of the words of institution" (see Brown). Brown also cites the specific Greek word "trōgein" to connect the "Bread of Life Discourse" to the Last Supper. In the Greek version of John, the Evangelist uses the word "trōgein" as Jesus instructs his disciples to eat his flesh. More specifically, this word is a verb which most directly translates into English as "to munch," "to gnaw," or "to chew" (see Bruce, 1983). In classical Greek, "trōgein" is commonly used to describe chewing like an animal (see Bruce). Brown states that there is no use in using such a specific verb, "to chew," if the "Bread of Life Discourse" is only to be understood spiritually (see Brown). The Evangelist must be writing about literally eating.⁵ The final piece to Brown's argument is that the "Bread of Life Discourse" does not really fit the theme of the rest of chapter 6. "[The words of the 'Bread of Life Discourse'] are really out of place anywhere during the ministry except at the Last Supper," according to Brown. He concludes his opinion with a hypothesis explaining why he the "Bread of Life Discourse" is not a part of the narrative leading up to the Crucifixion. In summary, Brown hypothesizes that vv. 35-50 and 51-58 are two versions of the same Discourse, with vv. 51-58 being the newer, more theologically developed version and originally belonging to the Last Supper scene in John 13. According to the Brown hypothesis, a later editor lifted the "Bread of Life Discourse" from the Last Supper Scene and added it to the end of its older version. This is compatible with the statement made by Beasley-Murray that "neither the Evangelist nor the Christian readers could have written or read the saying without conscious reference to the Eucharist."

Reasons Against a Sacramental Reading

While this theory *is* feasible, there is a stronger argument to be made that the "Bread of Life Discourse" and the Last Supper are two separate events. Raymond Bailey (1988) writes that the Evangelist's intention was not to make John 6 sacramental, but that "*contemporary readers and hearers* [emphasis added]" are "reminded of the symbols of the Lord's Supper." The argument made by Bailey is that the "Bread of Life Discourse" is not concerned with the Eucharist at all, but that later readers have gone back presupposed a sacramental meaning onto John 6. Though it is understandable why later readers would link the language in John 6 to eucharistic terminology, the "Bread of Life Discourse" would not have

⁵ There are nine different Greek verbs that describe eating in the New Testament, each having a distinct connotation or method

necessarily reminded the Evangelist or his contemporaries of the sacrament of the Eucharist. This weakens Beasley-Murray's assumption that the Evangelist and early Christian readers would have had the Eucharist in mind.

Maarten J. J. Menken (1997) criticizes an interpretation of the passage that too quickly assumes the centrality of the Eucharist. He writes, "It is often more presupposed than proven that the ['Bread of Life Discourse'] is about the [Last Supper]." Interestingly enough, however, Menken agrees with many of the remarks made by Beasley-Murray and Brown, though he comes to a different conclusion concerning sacramentality. On Beasley-Murray's point that John was familiar with the Eucharist when he wrote the Gospel, Menken agrees. While Menken does not believe that John 6 is about the Eucharist, he thinks it probable that the Evangelist intentionally uses the eucharistic terminology of "flesh" and "blood" to reference Jesus' death on the cross. Menken explains, "Language derived from the celebration of the Eucharist can be used to make statements about subjects that have some relationship to the Eucharist, but are not identical with it." An example that Menken gives is John's use of the word "trōgein," reiterating a point made earlier by Brown. Jesus and the disciples are not eating in this scene, but the Evangelist still uses the word "trōgein," because of its eucharistic undertones (see Menken). The word is not used because the disciples are actually eating, but because their actions should be associated with eating metaphorically. According to Menken, the main point of the passage is the christology, what Jesus reveals about himself, not the Eucharist. This is done through making a metaphor between himself and the manna in the desert, where "eating" the manna from Heaven parallels "believing" in Jesus (see Menken).

A metaphorical interpretation of the "Bread of Life Discourse" is also utilized by F. F. Bruce, where he says, "we recognize a powerful and vivid metaphor to denote coming to him, believing in him, appropriating him by faith." Bruce, like Menken, thinks that Jesus is alluding to his passion. He quotes Augustine of Hippo as saying, "a figure, bidding us communicate in our Lord's passion, and secretly and profitably treasure in our own memories the fact that for our sakes he was crucified and pierced" (see Bruce). Similar interpretations are offered by J. Ramsey Michaels (1989), who further posits that Jesus invites his disciples to suffer with him, and Merrill C. Tenney (1981), who emphasizes the relationship with Christ.

However, the most compelling non-sacramental argument for the "Bread of Life Discourse" is from the context within the chapter and the Gospel itself. Within the context of chapter 6, it does not make narrative literary sense to write about two miracles that occur by the Sea of Galilee (the feeding of the five thousand and walking on water) during the years of Jesus' ministry, then all of a sudden about an event that occurred the week of his Crucifixion (the Last

Supper). This argument does take into account that the Gospels are not concerned with keeping the chronological order of events like a modern-day history book. However, there is still little sense in immediately following the concluding line of the Discourse by testifying, "He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum" (v. 59) unless the Discourse *was* given in the synagogue at Capernaum. It is true that the implications of vv. 51-58 are far more extreme than vv. 35-50 (see Bruce), but these should be read as "a logical continuation of the preceding christological part of the discourse, a continuation which also contains a christological message" according to Menken. Based on this, it leads one to believe that the Evangelist is not concerned with the physical scene of the Last Supper in John 6. This does not mean, however, that John 6 has no sacramental implications at all.

Implications of a Non-Sacramental Reading

While the "Bread of Life Discourse" may not describe the events of the Last Supper, this does not mean that it cannot or should not apply to eucharistic theology altogether. Though Bailey writes that contemporary readers project the Eucharist into the "Bread of Life Discourse" as they read, he also states that the "centuries old debate as to whether or not the writer or editor intended for this chapter to be a eucharistic one seems moot in the context of the contemporary church." What Bailey means is that the sacramental debate is moot to contemporary readers because most people have already made up their minds on the meaning of the passage. In the face of difficult teaching, it would not be surprising for many to choose the interpretation that most closely fits with their previous understanding. This is why disciples left Jesus after he delivered the Discourse, and why some Christians are more inclined to maintain a sacramental interpretation of the "Bread of Life Discourse."

Another aspect of Bailey's point is that the issue of the sacramentality of the "Bread of Life Discourse" will have large implications for a number of groups of Christians. This is especially true for those belonging to denominations with especially robust eucharistic theology such as the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church. The "Bread of Life Discourse" is used widely to justify belief in transubstantiation, that is, the Catholic belief that the eucharistic elements of bread and wine are mystically transformed into the body and blood of Jesus at the moment of consecration during the mass. An excerpt from John 6 even appears in the Benedictine Catholic *New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*. But the issue of sacramentalism is not only one that concerns Catholics, as even the two Protestant giants Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli greatly debated this issue (see Daugherty, 2017). Luther, reading the "Bread of Life

Discourse” sacramentally, defended his belief in consubstantiation, that the eucharistic elements of bread and wine coexist with the body and blood of Jesus at consecration (see Daughrity). Zwingli interpreted the “Bread of Life Discourse” metaphorically and thought that the teachings of transubstantiation and consubstantiation were superstitious (see Daughrity). But what would it ultimately mean for these churches that use the “Bread of Life Discourse” as justification for their belief in Christ’s real presence Eucharist if, as explored in this work, the Discourse is not supposed to be interpreted sacramentally? The doctrine of true-presence is not going anywhere. The implications would not be such that a core pillar of doctrine for most worldwide Christians would immediately become void. There are plenty of other Bible passages from which you can base a doctrine of true-presence (see Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 1 Cor. 11: 23-25). Changes that these churches might have to make would be the way they interact with the text of John 6. Perhaps these churches would adopt the Menken interpretation of the text, seeing the parallels the “Bread of Life Discourse” has with eucharistic terminology, but gathering from the text what it reveals about Jesus’ christology. Maybe these churches would adopt a metaphorical interpretation similar to that of Bailey, Bruce, Michaels, or Tenney, where the emphasis is on belief in the saving power of God, participation in his suffering, and engaging in a personal relationship with him.

Even if one’s own church is not heavily invested in the interpretation of the “Bread of Life Discourse,” this piece of Scripture should touch the life of every Christian who reads it. The Discourse is a reminder of who God is, who we are, and what we are called to do. What we learn about God in the “Bread of Life Discourse” is that he is holy, from Heaven, and wants to abide in us (vv. 51, 56-58). What we are reminded about ourselves is that we are easily confused, mortal, and need saving (vv. 51-58). What we called to do is believe in God, participate in his suffering, accept his help, and allow him to abide in us (vv. 51-58).

Bailey, Raymond. “John 6.” Pages 95-98 in *Review & Expositor* 85, 1988.

Beasley-Murray, George R. *John 2*. World Biblical Commentary 36. Grand Rapids: Thomas Nelson, 1999.

Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John*. Anchor Bible 29. Garden City: Doubleday, 1966.

Bruce, F. F. *The Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.

Daughrity, Dyron B. *Martin Luther: A Biography for the People*. Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2017.

- Haenchen, Ernst. *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 1-6*.
Translated by Robert W. Funk. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- LaVerdiere, Eugene. *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church*.
Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996.
- Menken, Maarten J. J., "John 6:51c-58: Eucharist or Christology?" Pages 183-187
in *Critical Readings of John 6*. Edited by Alan R. Culpepper. New York:
Brill, 1997.
- Michaels, J. Ramsey. *John*. New International Biblical Commentary 4. Peabody:
Hendrickson, 1989.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and
Theological Survey* 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2018.
- Tenney, Merrill C. "The Beginning of Conflict." Pages 77-78 in vol. 9 of *The
Expositor's Bible Commentary* Vol 9. Grand Rapids: Zondervan
Publishing House, 1981.