

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 12

The Lord's Supper and the Gospels, Part 1

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When I introduced this topic and series, I said that I'm convinced that this doctrine is one of the least critically examined of all biblical doctrines. This episode gets us into some territory that illustrates the pervasive influence of assumptions about this topic. Anyone who has studied the doctrine knows that it is linked to the Last Supper. They also know about the problem of John 6, the "bread of life" passage. But did you know that John 6 isn't in the context of the Last Supper? Most students don't, and the observation begs the question of whether the controversial "eat my flesh and drink my blood" wording in John 6 has anything at all to do with the Lord's Supper, despite centuries of assuming that it's central to the topic.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast. In the last podcast, I introduced the confusion created by a variety of ideas you'll hear in church and read in theology books about the Lord's Supper, also known as communion or the Lord's Table. I made the comment that, in my judgment, doctrinal teaching about the Lord's Supper is one of the least critically examined areas of biblical teaching. I meant that. The last podcast introduced you to why. Additionally, as we closed last time, I gave you the list of New Testament passages which touch on this subject—those passages from which our understanding of the institution and doctrine ought to derive. I hope you read those, since I'm going to assume as much and jump right into the text.

The passages from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are straightforward enough. They simply relate the event of the Last Supper—the event to which Paul referred when writing about the Lord's Supper much later in 1 Corinthians 11. I'm going to repeat that for emphasis. *It was Paul who referred to the Last Supper in the Synoptic Gospels when discussing the meaning of the Lord's Supper.* You might say, "Why repeat that, Mike? Are you trying to telegraph something important—something that may be hidden in plain sight?" Yep.

Most of the confusion over the Lord's Supper and its meaning comes from John 6—the passage in the Gospel of John that has Jesus referring to his body as bread and his blood as wine. Some traditions take that literally and teach that the bread and wine literally become the flesh and blood of Jesus at communion, and

so they are ingesting Jesus, the Bread of Life—which surely has to contribute in some way to salvation. This is utterly wrong for a simple reason: John is not one of the Synoptic Gospels, and this episode in John 6 is not the Last Supper. In the three Synoptic Gospels and their description of the Last Supper, there are several elements present in all of them.

1. Jesus makes some comment that connects his broken body (the bread) and his blood (the wine) to the New Covenant.
2. After making that connection, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples and then tells them that one among their number will betray him.

John 6 doesn't have any of those details. In fact, the scene of the Last Supper and the announcement of the betrayal occurs in John 13—seven chapters later! The Last Supper scene is, therefore, completely disconnected from John 6, the Bread of Life teaching. We know from Paul that it is the night of the Last Supper that is supposed to inform our doctrine of communion, since Paul explicitly starts his own discussion of the Lord's Supper with the words, "the same night in which he was betrayed, he took bread..." That is nowhere in view in John 6, so framing your doctrine of communion on John 6 or with John 6 as the center is a bit misguided, to say the least.

We're getting a little ahead of ourselves. Let's start with the problem passage of John 6 and then work through that on its own terms, then come back to this disconnect issue. It's a long passage, so I'll be breaking it up into manageable morsels (pardon the pun) and highlighting some key ideas. Let's start by reading John 6:22-34 in the ESV.

²²On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone.²³ Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.²⁴ So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

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²⁵When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" ²⁶Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." ²⁸Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" ²⁹Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰So they said to

him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

There are a few things that are critical to notice from this section of John 6. First, Jesus links the idea of food that endures to eternal life to himself and, more importantly, to belief—that is, belief in him. That happens by noting three statements in the passage we just read. In verse 27, he says:

²⁷ Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.

Verse 29 says:

²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

Finally, verse 33:

³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

According to these three statements, we can make three text-driven observations already:

1. The thing we are to labor for (using the language of verse 27) is Jesus, who is (according to these verses) the food that gives eternal life. Some would stop the observation process right here and say, "Right. That's why we believe the wafer we eat at communion is the body of Christ. We need to consume the very body and blood of Christ as part of having eternal life." But that would be mistaken. You can't just pick verse 27 and think you understand the entire passage, let alone the verses that follow it.
2. According to these three statements, our job (as it were) is not "eating Jesus," even if that's understood as a communion wafer. Our job is to believe in Jesus. Believing was the eating, not the other way around. We learn that from verse 29. I'll read it again:

²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

This word “work” points back to the labor of verse 27—“work” and “labor.” When you read the two verses together, the food is Jesus and that means that the eating is believing, not literally eating anything. This is quite consistent with the third text-driven observation from verse 33.

3. It isn't bread or a wafer that gives eternal life. It's Jesus—the one who came down from heaven. When we combine verse 33 with those other two verses (interpreting all three as a group forming a whole, coherent thought), we see that what produces eternal life isn't any bread that represents Jesus. It's belief in Jesus. In other words, the object of faith is a *who*—a person—Jesus, not a *what* (a piece of bread that represents Jesus).

Let's keep reading. Here is John 6:35-40:

³⁵ 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. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ 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.”

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A few observations, again, are crucial to having a text-driven theology of communion and of this passage. First, notice that Jesus calls himself “the bread of life.” He is, therefore, using bread as an analogy for himself, for some reason. Is it coherent to presume that Jesus is saying or teaching that the disciples need to consume his actual flesh and blood—even if one softens that idea by asserting that the bread and wine ingested are transformed into his actual flesh and blood? The critical point here is that Jesus tells us what he means by the analogy. Don't forget, this isn't the Last Supper passage, anyway, that Paul draws on for his theology of communion. Setting that disconnect aside for the time being, what does Jesus say to clarify what he actually means? Well, right after he says “I am the bread of life,” in verse 35 he adds (catch this):

...whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

So, therefore, “coming” is the solution or the antithesis of hunger. Believing takes care of the thirst problem. Did you catch that? Hunger and thirst aren't satisfied by consuming Jesus in this passage, but by coming to him and believing on him.

Of course, the hunger and thirst... I think all views would admit and put forth the notion that we're talking about spiritual hunger and thirst. There's some spiritual deprivation. These things are not resolved by consuming Jesus' body and blood in any literal sense. The wording tells us that what Jesus means to say is that the solution is to come to him and believe on him. That's it. That tells us clearly that Jesus is using the bread and the wine as metaphorical and that his teaching isn't about consuming his flesh and blood in any literal sense directly, or by some sort of transformation process. The issue is, do you believe in Jesus, not whether you have eaten the body and blood of Jesus, however that is parsed. The issue is faith and belief. The bread and the wine are only analogies.

Lastly, this approach is demonstrated as accurate when we get to verse 40. Jesus says very plainly:

...everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life...

He doesn't say "everyone who consumes the bread and the wine at a ceremony, thereby ingesting my body and blood, will have eternal life." He doesn't say that at all. What he says—point blank—is that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life. The issue is believing in Jesus, not believing that we're consuming him and, therefore, through that act receiving him and his grace and his goodness, and so on and so forth.

I think you can see that this passage... not only is it dense and difficult to understand, you are swapping this into this whole discussion (even after trying to parse it) if you're letting this passage dictate how you think theologically about communion, about the Lord's Supper. It creates a lot of problems and a lot of misconceptions.

We'll continue with this issue in the next episode of the Naked Bible Podcast.