

---

# DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT THE ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW OF COMMUNION?

---

By Norman L. Geisler

## Introduction

In the first three Gospels Jesus is represented as saying “this is my body” and “this is my blood” (Mt. 26:26, 28; Mark 14:21, 24; Lk. 22:19, 21) about the bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper. This is repeated in 1 Corinthians 15:24. On another occasion Jesus exhorted his disciples to “eat” his “flesh” and “drink” his blood” (John 6:52-58). Roman Catholics base their doctrine of transubstantiation on these passages, affirming that bread and wine of the Communion are literally transformed into the physical body and blood of Christ, while retaining the outward appearance and characteristics of ordinary bread and wine.

## Roman Catholic Affirmations

The arguments used by Roman Catholics in support of taking the communion elements in this literalistic fashion include the following:

(1) They affirm that a literal interpretation of the phrases “eat my flesh” and “drink my blood” (in John 6) demands it by: (a) the literal wording; (b) by the need of his disciples to understand it clearly; (c) by the inference Paul draws from it that it is a sin against the “body and blood” of Christ (1 Cor. 11:27), and (d) by the normal use of the word “is” in Jesus statement, “This is my body” (Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 375).

(2) The words describing it as “true” (*alathas*, v. 55) food indicate it was literal.

(3) Jesus’ response to the reaction of the crowd’s rejection was not to retract the literal meaning of his claims.

(4) In the Bible eating flesh in a metaphorical sense means to persecute or destroy him (Psa. 27:2; Isa. 9:20; 49:26).

(5) Many of the early Fathers confirm the sacramental view, including Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Augustine.

(6) While all the other Gospels refer to Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper, there is no other reference in John to this important event than in chapter 6.

(7) The mention of blood along with flesh implies that Jesus is speaking of the two elements of the communion service. Otherwise, flesh alone would have been sufficient.

### **A Response to Roman Catholic Arguments**

(1) A "literal" historical-grammatical interpretation of the Bible does not demand that everything be taken literally. It posits only that all the Bible is literally true, not that everything in the Bible is true literally. The literal sense (*sensus literalis*) allows for figures of speech such as speaking of Jesus as "the Bread of Life" which should be eaten (Jn. 6:32-33) which immediately precedes this discourse on "eating his flesh" (Jm.6:52-71).

Also, the context provides evidence that Jesus did not intend his statements to be taken in a literalistic way. For if they are so taken, then anyone can gain eternal life simply by partaking of the communion elements. For Jesus said, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life..." (Jn. 6:54). But taking communion is not the condition for receiving the gift of eternal life, only *belief* is. For Jesus added that "everyone who looks on the Son and *believes in him* should have eternal life (cf. Jn. 3:14-18), and I will raise him up in the last day" (Jn. 6:40, emphasis added).

As for the other Catholic arguments that: (a) the word "body" has a physical meaning, it should be noted that it can and does have a spiritual meaning in other places in the NT (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). (b) As for the need of his disciples to understand it clearly, Jesus' further explanation of it satisfies this demand. (c) As for the inference that Paul draws from it that it is a sin against the "body and blood" of Christ (1 Cor. 11:27), this does not demand a sacramental interpretation. Since all believers are part of the spiritual body of Christ, thus, a sin against them is a sin against Christ (cf. Acts 9:5). (d) As for the normal use of the word "is," it is often employed of figures

of speech: Christ **is** the vine (Jn. 15); He **is** the water of Life (Jn. 4), and He **is** the door (Jn.10). The Bible is filled with metaphors (e.g., “The LORD **is** my rock”—Psa. 18:2).

(2) The word describing Jesus’ “flesh” as “*true* food” in John 6:55) does not mean it must be physical. Rather, it points to the fact that it was “real” (Gk: *alathas*), that is, a spiritual reality, not normal physical flesh.

(3) When Jesus gave the command that they should “eat” his flesh, the crowd reacted negatively (Jn. 6:52, 60, 66). It is objected by Catholics that “Jesus did not retract the promise or try to change their understanding of His words. He did not say He had been speaking poetically or metaphorically (Ronald Lawler ed., *The Teaching of Christ: A Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 376). And on other occasions he corrected the disciples when they did not understand him (e.g., Jn. 4:32).

In response, first of all, it should be noted that Jesus did not always correct the disciples misunderstanding directly or immediately. For example, he did not rebuke his disciples for misunderstanding his statement about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days (Jn. 2:19). They did not understand it until after his resurrection (Jn. 2:21-22).

Second, Jesus did try to correct their literalistic misinterpretation of his words in John 6 in several ways: (a) Jesus said, “The words that I have spoken to you are *spirit and life* (Jn. 6:63, emphasis added). (b) He also said, “*The flesh is of no help at all*” in understanding his words (Jn. 6:63, emphasis added). (c) Further Jesus equated “eating” his flesh with one who “*believes in him*” and thereby “has eternal life” (cf. Jn. 3:16, 18, 36). (d) Even Peter, who did not depart on hearing Jesus’ words, said that it was because “*we have believed and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God*” (Jn. 6:69, emphasis added). So, they did understand the true meaning of his words, but it was not a literalistic but a spiritual meaning.

(4) In the Bible eating physical objects metaphorically does not always mean to destroy them (as in Psa. 27:2; Isa. 9:20), as some Catholics argue. When it is used in a positive context, it means to ingest the spiritual reality that God has provided. For example, “O *taste* and see that the Lord is good” (Psa. 37:4). “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters . . . come, buy and *eat*” (Isa. 55:1). Ezekiel was told to “*eat*” the scroll (the Word of God) in a figurative sense

(Eze. 2:8-9). Peter said, “long for the pure spiritual milk that by [eating] it you may grow up unto salvation—if indeed you have *tasted* that the Lord is good” (1 Pet. 2:2-3, emphasis added).

(5) The argument from early Fathers is not definitive for many reasons: (a) The Bible is the authority for doctrine, not the early Fathers. (b) False doctrines, even heresy, began early, even in NT Times (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1f; 1 Jn. 4:1-6; Col. 2:8-23). There was a false teaching even among the disciples of Christ during the life of the apostle John (Jn. 21:20-23). (c) The Fathers can be used to *support* a biblical doctrine, but belief in the doctrine should be *based* on God’s revelation in Scripture. (d) When the early Fathers jointly expressed a doctrine in an ecumenical Creed, then it had much more weight. But this was never done in the early Creeds for the Catholic view of the sacraments since none of the early Creeds or Councils (which is accepted by all major sections of Christendom) ruled on this point. (e) Further, most of the early Fathers for the first few centuries cited by Catholics in favor of their view did not explicitly speak of transubstantiation but at best a Real Presence of Christ at Communion. Unlike many in later Catholicism, St. Augustine (5<sup>th</sup> cent.) stressed the symbolic nature of the sacraments. No council of the Church affirmed the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation until the Fourth Lateran Council (A.D. 1215) and later at the Council of Trent (A. D. 1551).

(6) The lack of reference to the institution of the Lord’s Supper in John can be explained by his theme and the facts that: (a) He is writing later than the Synoptic Gospels (Mt., Mk, and Lk.) and that he presupposes what the three earlier Gospels have said on matters like this. (b) Neither is there any reference in John to the birth of Jesus, His baptism, His Temptation, or the calling of the Twelve. It simply presupposes these events.

(7) Catholics argue that if it is not a reference to Communion, then why is blood mentioned separately in John 6:53? In response, John Calvin said, “He did so in respect to our weakness. For when He distinctly mentions food and drink, He says that the life which He bestows is complete in every part, so that we may not imagine some semi- or imperfect life.” (*Calvin’s Commentaries: St. John*, vol. 4., p. 170).

### **Arguments Against the Literalistic Sacramental Interpretation**

The actual Communion Service instituted by Jesus is recorded four times in the New Testament (Mt. 26:26-29; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:14-13, and 1 Cor. 11:17-26). In each case Jesus

is recorded saying, “This is my body,” and ‘this is my blood. And they were commanded to “eat” it (and to drink the cup). The Gospel of John chapter 6 speaks of eating “flesh” and drinking the “blood” of Christ. Based on these passages Roman Catholics have build their doctrine of transubstantiation, that the bread and wine are transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ, even though they still look, taste, and smell like normal bread and wine.

We have just considered the main arguments in favor of transubstantiation and the responses to them. Now, let’s examine the many arguments in favor of a non-literalistic view of the Communion element. Together, they make a formidable case against the Roman Catholic dogma.

(1) First of all, the sacramental interpretation of this passage is contrary to the historic time context in which it was given in John 6 and 1 Corinthians 11. The time of the institution of communion was John 13 was after the Passover, not John 6 after the sermon on the Bread of Life. As John Walvoord noted, “Since the Last Supper occurred one year later than the incidents recorded in this chapter, eating His flesh and drinking His blood should not be thought of as sacramentalism” (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 297). John 6 is an entirely different time and context. John Calvin added, “And, indeed, it would have been inept and unreasonable to preach about the Lord’s Supper before He had instituted it” (*Calvin’s Commentaries, The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 4, p. 170).

(2) If “eating his flesh” is taken literally, then everyone who partakes of communion is saved since Jesus said all who partake of it are given “eternal life” (Jn. 6:55). Obviously, this is false since there are those who partake of communion who are unbelievers or apostates.

(3) There is a text in this context which indicates that Jesus’ words are not to be taken literally: Jesus said, “*The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life*” (Jn. 6:63, emphasis added). As D. A. Carson says on this verse, “To take the words of the preceding discourse literally, without penetrating their symbolic meaning, is useless” (*The Gospel According to John*, 301).

(4) Jesus often used figures of speech in the Gospel of John to describe Himself such as, “water” (Jn. 4:14) “bread” (chap. 6:35), “light” (chap. 8:12), the “door” (chap. 10:7, 9), and the “vine” (chap. 15:1). But a literalistic sense makes no sense in any of these cases. Likewise, it

makes no sense when speaking of eating Christ's "flesh" because strictly speaking it would have cannibalistic overtones to Jews who were strictly forbidden by the Law of Moses to eat blood (Lev. 17:14).

5) Further, "eating" is a common biblical figure of speech for believing in God and ingesting spiritual nourishment from Him. The Psalmist said, "I taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psa. 34:8; Isa. 55:1; Eze. 3:2-3; 1 Pet. 2:2, 3). In the immediate context, Jesus spoke of Himself as the Bread of Life which, like the manna in the wilderness, they were to eat daily (Jn. 6:32-33). Indeed, the verb *meno* (to abide) in verse Jn. 6:56 expresses continual mystical fellowship between Christ and the believer as in [John] 15:4-7; 1 Jn. 2:6, 27, 28; 3:6, 24; 4:12, 16. [So], there is, of course, no reference to the Lord's Supper (Eucharist), but simply to mystical fellowship with Christ" (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, vol. 5, 112).

6) The close parallel between verses 54 and 40 reveals that they are referring to the same thing. The phrases "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood" and "everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him" has eternal life are a direct parallel. "Indeed, we have seen that this link is supported by the structure of the entire discourse. " So, "the conclusion is obvious: the former is the metaphorical way of referring to the later" (Carson, *ibid.* 297).

(7) Moreover, "the language of [John] vv. 53-54 is so completely unqualified that if its primary reference is to the Eucharist we must conclude that the one thing necessary for eternal life is participation at the Lord's Table. This interpretation of course actually contradicts the earlier parts of the discourse, not the least v. 40" (*ibid.*) which affirms that *belief* in the Son is the only necessary condition for receiving eternal life (cf. Jn. 3:16; 18, 36).

(8) The promise that those who eat and drink Christ's body and blood will be "raised up in the last day (Jn. 6:54)." This leaves "no room is left for a magical understanding of the Lord's table that would place God under constraint; submit to the rite, and win eternal life!" Rather, rightly understood, "this parabolically set[s] out what it means to receive Jesus Christ by faith" (Carson, 297.).

(9) Even St. Augustine, insisted that eating the communion elements did not bring life, unless "what is taken in the Sacraments visibly is in the truth itself eaten spiritually, drunk spiritually. For we have heard the Lord Himself saying, 'It is the Spirit that quickeneth, but the

flesh profiteth nothing.’ The words that have spoken to you, are Spirit and Life’’ (Sermon 81 in *Sermons on the New Testament*, vol. 6, p. 501). But according to Jesus, eating the “flesh and blood” of Christ brings eternal life (Jn. 6:54-58) now (cf. Jn. 5:24). So, he cannot be referring to the physical Sacraments here which do no such thing.

(10) In the communion ceremony Jesus said, “this is my body” (*soma*), not “this is my flesh” (*sarx*.)” If communion was in mind in John 6, it is more likely that the word “body” would have been used. But Communion is nowhere in Scripture spoken of as eating Christ’s flesh and drinking His blood (see Mt. 26:26-29; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:14-22; 1 Cor. 11:23-26).

(11) The Communion elements in the Gospels and 1 Corinthians 11 were not meant to be understood literally for several reasons:

First, since in the original context, when Jesus said “this is by body,” everyone present knew it was not literally his real body but a piece of bread being held by His real body (hand). So, if it is not understood symbolically, then St. Augustine’s statement is a bold contradiction when he declared; “Christ bore Himself in His hands, when he offered His body saying: ‘this is my body’” (Ott, *Fundamentals*, 377).

Second, the NT communion service was a *memorial* of Christ’s death (“Do this...in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:25, emphasis); it was *not a reenactment* of Christ’s physical death, as Roman Catholics claim.

Third, communion was a *proclamation* of Christ death, *not a physical partaking of it*, as Rome insists. Paul said, as often as it is done “you *proclaim* the Lord’s death” (1 Cor. 11:26, emphasis added).

Fourth, it was a *spiritual participation* in Christ’s death with others believers, not a physical *imbibing* of it, as Catholics claim. Thus, Paul said, “the bread that we beak, is it not a *participation* in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16, emphasis added) which was his spiritual body (see v. 17).

Fifth, the communion elements are still called “bread” and the “cup” [of wine] or “fruit of the vine” (Mt. 26:29) *after* it was consecrated and they were eating it, not the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 11:23-28) which it would have been according to the Catholic view.

*The reasons the communion elements should not be taken in the literalistic way which Roman Catholics do is summarized here (see Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 174):*

- (a) It is not *necessary* since Jesus often spoke in metaphors and figures of speech;
- (b) It is not *plausible* since vividness is not the proof of physicality;
- (c) It is not *possible* since Jesus would be holding himself in his own hand (when He said, “this is my body”).
- (d) It is *idolatrous* since if the consecrated host is really Christ’s body, then it can be worshipped (as Roman Catholics do).
- (e) It *undermines belief in the resurrection* because if our senses are deceiving us about the consecrated host, then how do we know they are not deceiving us about the resurrection appearances of Christ which is at the heart of the gospel.

(12) As A. T. Robertson said, “It would have been a hopeless confusion for the Jews if Jesus had used the symbolism of the Lord’s Supper” of which they knew nothing at that time. Indeed, “It would be real dishonesty for John to use this discourse as a propaganda for sacramentalism. The language of Jesus can only have a spiritual meaning as he unfolds himself as the true manna” (ibid., 112).

(13) Even some sacramentalists admit that “It may be granted that no one who heard the discourse [of Jesus in John 6] at Capernaum could understand it [as spoken] of the solemn institution [of the Lord’s Supper] which was still in the future, and then wholly outside any possibility of current thought.” Following a good rule of interpretation (that those who heard him should have been able to understand it), this alone should eliminate a sacramental interpretation. (*Ellicott’s Commentary on the Four Gospels*, vol. 6, p. 556). So, it is strangely inconsistent for him to add that “it does not follow that the discourse was not intended to teach the doctrine of the Eucharist” (ibid.). John 2:22 is cited as proof, but here the disciples should have understood what Jesus meant and later did understand it (Jn. 2:21-22). They were just “slow of heart” (cf. Luke 24:25). Further, if anything, John 2 supports the non-literalistic understanding of the statement of Jesus, just as is the case in John 6. So, if anything, John 2 supports taking John 6 in a non-literalistic way.



(14) Catholic misinterpretation of the communion holds that the body of Christ is offered over and over every time they have Mass. It is called the “unbloody *sacrifice* of the Mass.” However, according to Scripture, Christ only sacrificed himself once for all in his death on the cross. Hebrews declares: “But when Christ had offered for all time a *single sacrifice* for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb.10:12, emphasis added). So, the Roman Catholic belief that eating the “flesh” of Christ is part of celebrations in which Christ is sacrificed over and over and over again is clearly unbiblical.

(15) Catholic misinterpretation of John 6 involves the doctrine of transubstantiation which entails the worship of the Communion elements. The Council of Trent infallibly pronounced that "Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation” (CCC, 1376).” *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* adds that because the elements are transformed into the body and blood of Christ it is appropriate to engage in the “Worship of the Eucharist” (CCC 1378) which is the “worship of adoration” (CCC 1418). From a biblical and empirical perspective, this is a form of idolatry—the worship of created things (Ex. 20:4-5; Rom. 1:25).

Even after the elements are allegedly transformed, they still looked, tasted, and smelled like bread and wine. So, the God who made our senses is asking us to distrust what He has made. Even in the biblical miracle of turning water to wine (Jn. 2), one is not asked to believe that when it looks, tastes, and smells like water, it is really wine, and when it looks, smells and tastes like wine it is really water. In short, even in the case of a miracle we are not asked to believe that our senses are deceiving us!

## **Conclusion**

The sacramental Roman Catholic interpretation of this passage is: (a) contrary to the time context in which it was given; (b) contrary to Jesus’ use of figures of speech in John; (c) contrary to the one condition for eternal life being which Jesus gave being belief; (d) contrary to Jesus

statement that “the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life”; (e) contrary to the continual nature of the mystical union with Christ indicated by abiding (Gk: *meno*); (f) contrary to the close parallel between “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood” and “everyone ...who believes in him” has eternal life (vv. 40, 55); (g) contrary to the communion formula of “body and blood” (1 Cor. 11:23-26) versus “flesh and blood” in John 6; (h) contrary to the biblical prohibition against eating blood (Lev. 17:14), and contrary to the biblical prohibition against idolatry.

When speaking of this literalistic misinterpretation of Jesus’ words, the great Greek scholar A.T. Robertson declared: “To me that is a violent misrepresentation of the Gospel and an utter misrepresentation of Christ. It is a grossly literal interpretation of the mystical symbolism of the language of Jesus which the Jews also misunderstood” [So], there is, of course, no reference to the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist), but simply to mystical fellowship with Christ” (*Word Pictures*, vol. 5, p. 112). It involves an idolatrous violation of God’s command: “You shall worship the Lord your God and him alone shall you serve” (Mt. 4:10).