

“Something Other Than Literalism or Symbolism”

John 6:35, 41–51

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August 11, 2024

Over the years, I have come to accept the fact that I am an ecclesiastical oxymoron, perhaps in more ways than one, but as James Dunn used to say, better an oxymoron than an ordinary one. What I am referring to is the fact that I am a Baptist sacramental theologian.

I did doctoral work at a Presbyterian seminary, and my advisor had a PhD from the University of Notre Dame, but it's not just a function of the school's and professor's biases. I believe there is something more than the symbolic about sacred rituals like baptism and communion, not full-blown transubstantiation, but there is grace in these rituals. They create space for our response of faith, but surely God is in them too.

Interestingly, in my research, starting over thirty years ago, I discovered that clergy and scholars from the other end of the liturgical spectrum were moving in our direction too, away from a sacramental view that is almost magical. For example, Regis Duffy, a Roman Catholic theologian, a Franciscan who taught at St. Bonaventure University, said that in communion the body of Christ is at the table, not on the table. He moved from the normative sacramental perspective that, properly blessed, the bread and juice we partake of become the literal body and blood of Christ in us to the view that as followers of Jesus sharing this meal, we are the body of Christ.

Perhaps he too was an ecclesiastical oxymoron, but I embrace this language - the body of Christ is at the table, not on the table. It is why I distance the words of institution from the partaking of the elements. I don't say, "This is my body," as we eat the bread but rather embed these words in the welcome to the table. The meal is sacred, Christ is present, but not in the bread and juice, in the people who share it.

I assume that many of you will be with me so far, but what do we do with our reading from John 6 where Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes

in me will never be thirsty (v. 35).”? Later in this chapter, he will become even more graphic, saying things like, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them (v. 56).”

It’s little wonder that the first people who hear him say this complain among themselves, partly because he says he is the bread that comes down from heaven, some special gift from God, when they know he is just Mary and Joe’s kid. They watched him grow up. Some of their kids played with him. But they also complain, in fact, some of them decide to stop following Jesus, because what he is saying is so difficult to comprehend. He is bread to be eaten and his blood is to be... no thanks! No wonder the Romans referred to Christians as cannibals!

How do we make sense of this language? To begin with, we avoid hyper-literal thinking. As one scholar has put it, Jesus is not a baked product in his physical makeup (to be consumed). It may seem unnecessary to underscore this, but in the history of the church, there have been those who have taken Jesus’ words quite literally.

There were two monks in the medieval period who said that one has to be very careful when eating communion bread so as not to crush the bones of Jesus. We can imagine how this played out in church life. Who felt like their faith was strong enough to pull this off? No one! So, almost no one ever ate communion bread, only a few monks.

Yet while it is important to avoid hyper-literal thinking, it is also important not to reduce communion and baptism to just symbols. In Baptist life, we think of baptism as something for someone old enough to believe for him/herself to do, as our response to God’s love in Christ, as a symbol of faith. But is there not some grace in the ritual too, some sense in which God is present offering us a blessing? This is what Jesus experiences in baptism, God’s blessing and affirmation. Whether we call it a ritual of blessing or a sacrament, it is more than a symbol.

I was seventeen when I was baptized. I was not involved in church until I was fifteen. My parents had negative experiences with the church, my mother having been judged for her divorce and disillusioned by the church’s opposition to integration, and my father having seen the downside of all three Abrahamic faiths as an SAS operative in the

Middle East. So, I wandered into a church as a long-haired teenager wearing blue jeans partly because adolescence is a time for spiritual exploration and partly as my way of rebelling against my parents.

But in the people and teaching of Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and in the story and person of Jesus Christ, I found acceptance, meaning, and purpose. Baptism was a way of giving witness to this experience and making a commitment of faith, but in the ritual itself, with all those church people who mattered so much to me present, I sensed the nearness and love of God in a way I cannot put into words. It was much more than a symbol for me and for many of you.

The same can be said of communion. We remember the meal Jesus shared and the context in which he shared it. We remember his suffering and death but also his resurrection which becomes a lens through which we view everything else. And these memories move us, challenge us, and inspire us, but as we remember, and as we eat and drink just like Jesus and his disciples, something else happens.

We have a sense that we are not alone, the Spirit of Christ is with us, providing comfort and strength, hope and peace. Frederick Buechner once said that it's like a young widow remembering her husband who suddenly feels like he is there beside her (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 58). We remember Jesus in the way he asked us to, and we realize he is with us, and when we do, we find what we need most.

So, when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty," he is offering to feed us, not by magically entering us through a little bread and juice, but not simply by stirring our thoughts either, rather through his very real presence in our lives.

We might say he feeds us spiritually, and he does, but Jesus' entire ministry is incarnational, it is enfleshed, not just ethereal. He feeds the five thousand with real bread and fish before beginning his discourse on the bread of life. He feeds us in every way, he nurtures every aspect of our being, and not just through communion, through all of life.

Consider the language of our service music today. The hymn of praise talks about "the wine of compassion" and bread that nourishes us

well. The hymn of devotion talks about being fed in a way that replaces wandering with truth, restlessness with joy, loneliness with peace. The communion anthem speaks of feeding that “fills my heart with rest” and heals our woes, offers “treasures of grace” and the promise of eternal life. The hymn of discipleship says that as all are fed, a new community is made in Christ’s communion bread, division ends, love makes us one. These texts provide a sermon in and of themselves, they speak of Christ the living bread nurturing us in every way possible – with compassion, truth, joy, peace, healing, grace, and hope for eternal life.

We might add that what Christ offers in all these ways is not just enough to get by but more than we need in overabundance. I think of a trip I made while I was in college to see my grandmother in Lincolnton. Ganny expressed love through food, and I loved to eat large quantities of it, since I ran eighty miles a week at the time, so we were well-matched. But even I could not keep up with all she cooked.

My first morning there she made me a big breakfast – scrambled eggs, grits, homemade biscuits, bacon, sausage, and livermush, in addition to sliced peaches. As I finished this feast, she headed off to work at her Merle Norman store, saying that she had a pork roast, black-eyes peas, and collard greens for lunch, but in case I got hungry in between meals, she had made a pot of corn, okra, and tomato soup.

In case I got hungry? How in the world could anyone, even me, get hungry in between these meals?! But that’s how she fed her grandchildren, that’s how she expressed love, in overabundance. That’s how Christ feeds us, that’s how God expresses love.

Perhaps the best way to think about Jesus as the bread of life is expressed by a repeated phrase in our hymn of devotion – taste and see the grace eternal, taste and see that God is good. Taste and see... it is language shaped by the specific details of our reading about Jesus and bread, but it also points in a more general way to experience. We don’t judge a meal by looking at it or thinking about it; we judge a meal by eating it. So it goes with God’s love in Christ. Debating theology has its place, but the best way to learn about the sacred is through experience. So, let’s get to it!