

Preacher's Pen points

Does John 6:54 refer to the Lord's Supper?



John 6:54 is one of the most puzzling and often misunderstood passages in the gospels. It is part of Jesus' response to the Jews who asked Him for "a sign from heaven": *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him."* (Jn. 6:53-56)

A Common Misinterpretation

It may seem at first glance that Jesus is referring to the Lord's Supper, since we eat bread as a memorial of His body and drink the fruit of the vine as a memorial of His blood. However, this interpretation has a number of problems. First, it does not properly consider the contextual setting and the parallel figurative language that Jesus uses throughout the chapter. Second, it ignores the present tense verbs that indicate that Jesus could be "eaten" at that very time, long before the establishment of the Lord's Supper and while He was physically present with men. Third, it lends support to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, the erroneous view that the Lord's Supper is a re-offering of the body and blood of the Lord and that the elements themselves become His body and blood. Thus, it is contended that when one eats the bread and drinks the cup, one literally eats and drinks Jesus' body and blood and receives through it forgiveness of sins.

A Better Understanding

Jesus' words should be understood in light of the context. The day before He had fed the multitudes with five loaves and two fish; but they had failed

to understand the true significance of the sign He had performed. Jesus therefore urged them not to labor for physical food; but for the food that produces eternal life (Jn. 6:27). As the argument advances, He reveals that He is that food, the bread of life that came down from heaven for the life of men (Jn. 6:33, 41). Thus, in keeping with the figure, it would be necessary for all men to "eat" Him (Jn. 6:57), or more specifically "eat" His flesh and "drink" His blood" (v. 53).

The words "eat" and "drink" are figurative as the "flesh" and "blood" eaten and drunk. In keeping with the metaphor of Himself as the bread of life, Jesus urged his hearers to "eat" and "drink", that is, receive Him, His word, and His death on the cross. Thus, we eat the bread of life when we believe and come to Jesus (Jn. 6:35) and obey His commands (cf. Jn. 6:56, 68 with 1 Jn. 3:24).

Why did Jesus use the strong terms "eat" my flesh and "drink" my blood? It appears He did so to awaken, by strong figurative language, his hearers out of their carnal mindset. Undoubtedly, He hoped that these strong statements would move them from thinking about physical eating to spiritual eating. However, even these strong words could not separate them from their carnal mentality. Thus, they thought he was advocating cannibalism (Jn. 6:52), when in actuality He was speaking of the spiritual consumption of Himself as the "bread of life".

Exhortation

Today let us appreciate the message of John 6:54, affirming the truth of His claim to be the "bread of life" while avoiding the misapplication of His words to the Lord's Supper.

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