

[Print this page](#)

[Close](#)

My Flesh Is Real Food

Tim Staples

Scenario:

You're at the annual family reunion barbecue. In the midst of the fun you overhear your cousin Mark (who left the Church in college and now attends a Fundamentalist Baptist church) arguing heatedly about religion with several of your Catholic relatives. He's got his Bible out and is vigorously explaining why the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist is "unbiblical." "You don't really believe that you eat Jesus when you receive Communion, do you?" he rolls his eyes, shaking his head at the very thought. "It's obvious from Scripture that Jesus was speaking symbolically when He talked about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. He didn't mean that literally." Your relatives are no match for Mark's energy and confidence. And besides, they don't have Bibles with them, so he's pretty much in charge of the conversation. That is, until you walk over and with a big smile you ask, "Mark, if I can show you from the Bible that your argument is wrong and that Christ did teach that He is really present in the Eucharist, will you come back to the Catholic Church?" Mark's sermon stops in mid syllable. He grins and shakes his head. "There is no way you can prove that from the Bible. And besides, you're a Catholic. Your doctrines don't come from the Bible, anyway."

Your response:

"Well, we'll see about that. But please answer my question. If I can show you from the Bible that the Catholic teaching is true, will you come back to the Church?" "Heck yeah," he snorts, confident your proposition is one he can't lose. "Go ahead and try. But first, answer me this: In John 10:1, Jesus said He is a 'door.' Do you believe He has hinges and a doorknob on His body? In John 15:1, Jesus said He is a 'vine.' Do you take Him literally there? If not, why do you take His words literally in John 6 where He talked about His flesh and blood being like food and drink? You Catholics are inconsistent."

Step One:

Explain that if Jesus was not speaking literally in John 6 ("My flesh is real food; My blood is true drink," etc.), He would have been a poor teacher. After all, everyone listening to Him speak those words understood that He meant them literally. They responded, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" In the cases of Jesus saying He is a "door" or a "vine," we find no one asking, "How can this man be a door made out of wood?" or, "How can this man claim to be a plant?" It was clear from the context and the Lord's choice of words in those passages that He was speaking metaphorically. But in John 6 He was speaking literally. In John 6:41, the Jews "murmured" about Christ's teaching precisely because it was so literal. Christ certainly knew they were having difficulty imagining that He was speaking literally, but rather than explain His meaning as simply a metaphor, He emphasized His teaching, saying, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give is My flesh for the life of the world" (John 6:51). Why would Christ reinforce the literal sense in the minds of His listeners if He meant His words figuratively? Now point out how the Lord dealt with other situations where His listeners misunderstood the meaning

of His words. In each case, He cleared up the misunderstanding. For example, the disciples were confused about His statement, "I have meat to eat that you know not of" (John 4:32). They thought he was speaking about physical food Ñ real meat. But He quickly cleared up the misunderstanding with the clarification, "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, that I may perfect his work" (Matt. 4:34; cf. 16:5-12). Back to John 6. Notice that the Jews argued among themselves about the meaning of Christ's words. He reiterated the literal meaning again: "Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within you" (verses 53-54). In verse 61 we see that no longer was it just the wider audience but "the disciples" themselves who were having difficulty with this radical statement. Surely, if Christ were speaking purely symbolically, it's reasonable to expect that He would clear up the difficulty even if just among His disciples. But He doesn't. He stands firm and asks, "Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?" (Verse 62-63). Did Christ "symbolically" ascend into heaven after the Resurrection? No. As we see in Acts 1:9-10, His ascension was literal. This is the one and only place in the New Testament where people abandon Christ over one of His teachings. Rather than try to correct any mistaken understanding of His words, the Lord asks His Apostles, "Do you also want to leave?" (verse 67). His Apostles knew He was speaking literally. St. Paul emphasizes the truth of the Real Presence: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord . . . Whoever eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11:27-29). If the Eucharist is merely a symbol of the Lord's body and blood, then St. Paul's words here make no sense. For how can one be "guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord" if it's merely a symbol? This Greek phrase for being "guilty of someone's body and blood" (enokos estai tou somatos kai tou haimatos tou kuriou) is a technical way of saying "guilty of murder." If the Eucharist is merely a symbol of Christ, not Christ Himself, this warning would be drastically, absurdly overblown.

Step Two:

Next point out the fact that the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Holy Eucharist was a doctrine believed and taught unanimously by the Church since the time of Christ. The Catholic "literal" sense was always and only the sense in which the early Christians understood Christ's words in John 6. The "figurative" or "metaphorical" sense was never held by the Church Fathers or other early orthodox Christians. This can be proven not just by appealing to the writings of the Fathers, but also by the fact that ancient Christian traditions such as the Copts and the Orthodox Churches also hold and teach the doctrine of the Real Presence, just as the Catholic Church does. St. Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of St. John the Apostle and successor of St. Peter as bishop of Antioch, wrote: "They [the heretics] abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, Flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in His goodness, raised up again" (Epistle to the Smyrnaeans 6 [A.D. 107]).

Even Martin Luther himself admitted that the early Church was unanimous in the literal interpretation of Christ's words in John 6: "Who, but the devil, hath granted such license of wresting the words of holy Scripture? Who ever read in the Scriptures that my body is the same as the sign of my body? . . . It is only the devil, that imposeth upon us by these fanatical men. . . .Not one of the Fathers, though so numerous, ever spoke [thus] . . . they are all of them unanimous."

Step Three:

You can make your case another way. Say, for the sake of argument, that Christ intended His words in John 6 to be understood metaphorically. Even if this were granted, the anti-Catholic argument your cousin Mark is using still falls apart. Here's why: The

phrases "eat flesh" and "drink blood" did indeed have a symbolic meaning in the Hebrew language and culture of our Lord's time. You can demonstrate this by quoting passages such as Psalm 27:1-2, Isaiah 9:18-20, Isaiah 49:26, Micah 3:3, and Revelation 17:6,16. In each case, we find "eating flesh" and "drinking blood" used as metaphors to mean "to persecute," "to do violence to," "to assault," or "to murder." Now, if Christ were speaking metaphorically, the Jews would have understood him to be making an absurd statement: "Unless you persecute and assault Me, you shall not have life in you. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you do violence to Me and kill Me, you shall not have life within you." Besides being an absurd understanding of these words, there's one further problem with the "metaphorical" view: Jesus would have been encouraging Ñ exhorting! Ñ His hearers to commit violent mortal sins. If it were immoral, in any sense, for Christ to promise to give us His flesh to eat and His blood to drink, then he could not have command us to even symbolically eat and drink His body and blood. Even symbolically performing an immoral act is of its very nature immoral. You can see your explanations are hitting home, but you're not done yet. Mark still has a few arguments left. "Look," he sighs. "You haven't convinced me. After all, Jesus Himself said in John 6:63 that He wasn't speaking literally: 'It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.' How do you get around that?"

Your response:

The word "spirit" (Greek: pneuma) is never used anywhere in Scripture to mean "symbolic." John 4:24 says God is "spirit" (pneuma). Does that mean He is "symbolic?" Hebrews 1:14 tells us that angels are "spirit" (pneuma). Are angels merely symbols? Of course not. You can multiply the examples of the constant use of the word "spirit" as a literal, not figurative, reality. Now point out that sarx, the Greek term for "flesh," is sometimes used in the New Testament to describe the condition of our fallen human nature apart from God's grace. For example, St. Paul says that if we are "in the flesh," we cannot please God (cf. Rom. 8:1-14). He also reminds us that, "the natural person does not accept what pertains to the Spirit of God, for to him it is foolishness, and he cannot understand it because it is judged spiritually" (1 Cor. 2:14). Remind Mark that it doesn't require grace to look at Communion as just grape juice and crackers. It does, however, require faith and "spiritual judgment" to see and believe Christ's promise that He would give us His body, blood, soul and divinity under the appearances of bread and wine. The one who is "in the flesh," operating in the realm of mere natural understanding, won't see this truth. Your cousin has a comeback ready. "But Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.' I believe this means that coming to Him is what He really means by "eating" and believing in Him is what He really means by "drinking." Not so. Point out that "coming to" and "believing in" Christ are definite requirements for having this life He promises, but not the only ones. It would, after all, be a sacrilege to receive the Eucharist without believing (cf. 1 Cor. 11:27-29). But this doesn't erase the fact that Christ repeatedly said, "My flesh is real food, and My blood is real drink." This literal dimension of the passage can't be explained away by appealing to "coming" and "believing." To do that would be to make the mistake of focusing solely on just one aspect of the Lord's teaching and ignoring the rest of it. Mark is starting to look a little uncomfortable. You're still smiling. He's not. "Wait!" he says. "Leviticus 17:10 condemns eating blood. There's no way Jesus would contradict this. He would have been encouraging cannibalism if He really meant for us to eat His body and drink His blood. That would be immoral."

Step Four:

Acknowledge that Leviticus 17:10 indeed condemns "eating blood." Then say, "If we're going to be consistent with the Levitical Law, then we must also perform animal sacrifices Ñ lambs, pigeons, turtledoves Ñ according to Leviticus 12:8. But as Christians, we are not under the Levitical Law. We're under the 'law of the spirit of life in

Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:2). Hebrews 7:11-12 tells us the Levitical Law has passed away with the advent of the New Covenant. A New Testament commandment always abrogates an Old Testament commandment. For example, in Matthew 5, the Lord repeatedly uses the formula, "You have heard that it was said (quoting an Old Testament law), But I say unto you . . ." In each instance, Christ supercedes the Old Testament law with a new commandment of His own, such as the commandment against divorce and remarriage, overagainst Moses' allowance for it in Deuteronomy 24:1 (cf. Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). This is what we see in John 6. The blood prohibition in Leviticus 17:11-12 was replaced by Christ's new teaching in John 6:54: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you shall have no life in you." Eating blood was prohibited in the Old Testament, "Because the life of the flesh is found in the blood" (Lev. 17:11). Blood is sacred and the life of each creature is in its blood. Many pagans thought they could acquire "more" life by ingesting the blood of an animal or even a human being. But obviously this was foolish. No animal or human person has the capacity to do this. But in the case of Christ, it's different. John 6:54 tells us that our eternal life depends on His blood: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you shall have no life in you."

Step Five:

By now Cousin Mark has run out of things to say. Rather than hold him to his promise to become Catholic on the spot, give him a hug, tell him you're praying for his return to the Church and that he's always welcome to come home. Then go get another helping of Aunt Mary's potato salad. You've earned it.

Tim Staples can be reached at St. Joseph's Radio, PO Box 2983, Orange, CA 92859, (714) 744-0336.

back to [top](#)