

“My Flesh Is True Food, My Blood Is True Drink”

Historical Significance

Tuesday, October 31, 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the official start to a gospel movement which we refer to as the Protestant Reformation. The starting place was Wittenberg, Germany. A monk named Martin Luther posted a list of discussion points in Latin to the door of the college church in that city. Those doors served as the social media platform of the day. Luther intended to spur debate among his colleagues and students about the health of the church and her faithfulness to the gospel. Without Luther's permission, someone took his ideas, translated them into German and distributed them widely. After that, there was no turning back.

It is not an exaggeration to speculate that we would not be sitting here this morning had this Reformation not occurred. Many churches today are celebrating this historic milestone. They are thanking God for the influence and achievements of leaders like Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and others. It's difficult to know whether such leaders would want us to celebrate them. John Calvin insisted on burial in an unmarked grave. He wanted no one to turn his memory into an act of religious devotion. It is true that the Reformation was a recovery of the authority of the Bible and the supremacy of the gospel for the church. So, it is fitting that earlier we sang Martin Luther's hymn, “A Mighty Fortress.” In the last verse we affirmed the power of the Word to overcome all enemies, including Satan and death. The reformers revived the practice of preaching the Bible as the center point of Christian worship. I believe the best way to celebrate the Reformation is to preach God's word and honor the gospel of Jesus Christ. I intend to do that by continuing through our study in John.

As I do, I also intend to highlight a doctrine that was precious to reformers like Luther and Calvin. I hope that it will become more precious to each of you today. The passage which will be our focus is John 6:51-59. And the doctrine I intend to highlight is “Union with Christ.” Let me confess that, in my life and ministry, I have devalued this truth of union with Christ. I have known the phrase for years. But I have failed to teach and live the all-encompassing truth which this little phrase describes. The more I study the Scriptures, the more I agree with John Murray who wrote one of the most significant books on salvation in the previous century (*Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*). In this book he claimed:

“Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. . . . [T]he greatest mystery of creaturely relations is the union of the people of God with Christ. . . . he communes with his people and his people commune with him in conscious reciprocal love. . . . The life of faith . . . must have the passion and warmth of love and communion because communion with God is the crown and apex of true religion.”

The Bible teaches union with Christ in two significant ways. The first is directly through phrases like “in Christ” or “with Christ.” Read Ephesians 1 and count the number of times that the phrase “in Christ” appears. And this is just one chapter in the New Testament. The other way is indirectly through word pictures or metaphors that describe union with Christ. There are many. The Bible pictures union with Christ like the relation between building stones and the cornerstone that aligns and strengthens the whole building. It is compared with the head of a physical body and all the other parts of that body. It is compared to the union between a husband and wife. As we heard earlier in John 15, union with Christ is compared to the relationship between a grapevine and its branches. Union with Christ is supremely compared to the

relationship in the Trinity between God the Father and God the Son. We could add more. There are so many because no one picture can adequately describe what the Bible means by union with Christ. The biblical evidence for its importance is extensive. In previous sermons, we have been describing life in Christ as true life. We can say that the all-encompassing description of True Life is: Union with Christ. Take a moment and write this phrase in the notes. The All-Encompassing Description of True Life is Union with Christ.

One of the word pictures for union with Christ is found in the passage we will look at again this morning. Take a Bible and turn to John 6. If you are picking up one of the Bibles in the row, John 6:51 appears on p. 892. For a few weeks we have been dancing all around the main metaphor of this chapter: eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood. Let's address it directly this morning. To begin, listen as I read vv. 51-59 which focuses on this metaphor. Jesus speaks,

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” ⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “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 you. ⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹ Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

Christians have long asked the same question the Jews did about Jesus in v. 52: How can this man give us his flesh to eat? How does Jesus intend for a person to feed on his flesh and drink his blood? It does sound strange. Some traditions have interpreted this passage as referring to the Lord's table, teaching that we eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood in the bread and cup served at communion. I do not believe this is Jesus' point here and I'll mention a few reasons why. **First**, Jesus is offering himself here in this passage, but he does not give his literal flesh to them to eat. **Second**, Jesus did not institute the Lord's Supper for many months after John 6. Yet the passage suggests that some of his disciples had come to eat and drink of him even at this stage. Jesus uses this difficult word picture not to describe a physical act but to define what faith really is. You can see this by comparing v. 54 and v. 40. They are parallel verses. In v. 54 Jesus refers to eating and drinking him. In v. 40 he speaks of looking on him and believing in him. **Third**, it is significant that John does not record Jesus instituting the Lord's supper. If this significant discourse in chapter 6 were meant to point to that coming ordinance, John would have included it in his gospel. Instead, he emphasizes Jesus offering his flesh on the cross as a once for all sacrifice. A **fourth** reason why I do not believe that this passage is about the Lord's Table is that, if it were, we would reduce feeding on Christ to a literal act rather than accepting it as the all-encompassing lifestyle that it is. My hope for our church is that we practice the Lord's Table as an application of John 6. It is one of the signs to show that we show that we are continuously and spiritually feeding on our Savior.

True Life: How We Enjoy It (Feeding on Christ)

Whether you agree with me or not, join me in thinking about how Christians enjoy true life by feeding on Christ. What does Jesus want us to learn about living in union with him through the word picture of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. In previous weeks we have mentioned how offensive this metaphor is. It

reminds us that Christ must die if we are going to have true life. We must own his death. That's the starting point. This morning I add six positive implications of union with Christ from this passage.

It is an intimate union

We begin by noting that it is an intimate connection. What could be more closely united than a body with the food that it consumes? Food unites with the body at a molecular level. Its benefits migrate to the whole body. No part is left out. Union with Christ implies intimacy with Christ. It takes Christ into the very depths of our being. We invite him to pervade every part of our lives. To enjoy true life in Christ means that we cannot hold back any aspect of our lives from him. Imagine trying to tell our bodies that we want nutrients from food to reach our legs but not our hands. Impossible. So, Christ comes into our lives and begins to exercise his Lordship over every detail of our lives. He gives life to us at work, at home, at school, at our hobbies, in our leisure, at church, in our relationships. He is the unseen colleague in every enterprise, the unseen guest at every meal, the unseen companion in every encounter, the unseen passenger on every trip, and the unseen associate for every activity. If Christ is not the live-giving Lord in all areas of life, then perhaps you have not yet entered an intimate union with him.

It is an ongoing union

Union with Christ is also an ongoing union. We must ingest food and drink continually to live. We cannot eat on Sunday and expect the nutrition to keep us going through the whole week. We replenish our bodies several times a day. Similarly, Christ insists that we feed on him. Notice the abundance of present tense verbs in this passage. The present tense refers to ongoing action. Look at verse 54. "Whoever feeds (present tense) on my flesh and drinks (present tense) my blood. The same two present tense verbs are repeated in v. 56. In that verse, the verb "abide" is in the present tense. It is the same word we heard in John 15 about abiding in the vine. Move to v. 57 where the verb "feeds" is also in the present tense as it is again in v. 58.

When you come to Christ you believe in a once-for-all sacrifice. But there is no such thing as a once-for-all faith. Saving faith is present tense. If someone asks you if you are a Christian, and you answer that at some point in the past you prayed a prayer and received Christ, your answer is sadly deficient. What are you believing right now? Is your faith present tense? Later in the service we will read the apostles' creed together. It begins with the affirmation "I believe." It is a present reality. This is the truth on which I currently and constantly stake my eternal destiny. There are no part-time Christians. Feeding on Christ implies an ongoing union. If he is only your Savior on Sunday, he is no Savior at all. If believing is only a childhood memory, then he is not truly Lord.

It is a nourishing union

Third, union with Christ is a nourishing union. By calling himself true food and true drink Jesus identifies himself as the diet for the living soul. As food gives strength to the body, so Christ gives life and health to the soul. This is important considering other foods that we eat to try to find life. Here's the problem. When we eat other foods that we hope will give us life, they do not nourish us, they eat us up. If you seek life through a drug, in the end it will not nourish you, it will eat you up and destroy you. If you seek life in your work or profession, in the end it will not nourish you it will eat you up. If you seek life in an unhealthy relationship, it will not nourish you it will eat you up. If you seek life in gambling or shopping, in the end these will not nourish you, they will eat you up.

Jesus is completely different. When you feed on him he truly gives life. He will nourish you. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you (Philippians 4:13). He invites you:

Psalm 34:8 Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

We did not read the verse earlier, but jump down to v. 63. There Jesus notes that his words are spirit and life. He reminds us that the way he nourishes his people is through his word. We find and feed on Christ in pages of Scripture. The whole Bible is Jesus Christ speaking to us. Living in union with Christ means constantly feasting on his written word: reading it, memorizing it, meditating on it, studying it, sharing it. How malnourished we are when we put our Bibles on the shelf and rarely open them. Just as it takes time and effort to prepare nourishing meals, so takes time and effort to grow strong in the meat of the word. Wherever you are today, Christian, improve your spiritual diet. Break open the Bible every day. Dig into it like you would into a Thanksgiving feast. Savor its truth. Satisfy your heart with the richness of its truth. Make time in the Bible table fellowship with God. You are living in union with him. Make your testimony that of Jeremiah,

Jeremiah 15:16 Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts.

It is a mutual union

A fourth conclusion from the passage is that it is a mutual union. Here the metaphor breaks down somewhat. Note what Jesus says in v. 56.

John 6:56 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.

When we take food, it abides in us. But Jesus adds that the who feeds on him abides in him. We do not abide in our food. But, as we said earlier, no one picture fully describes union with Christ. This relationship means that the Christian is in Christ and Christ is in the Christian. John will hear Jesus use similar language in

Revelation 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Union with Christ is like two friends sharing table fellowship. We will picture this at the Lord's table shortly. We look forward to eating and drinking with Christ in his future kingdom. But even now we are in him and he is in us by faith. He assures us of both truths. He will never leave us (Hebrews 13:5; He is in us) and no one is able to snatch us out of his hand (John 10:28; we are in him). Christ both indwells us by his Spirit (he is in us) and seals us with his Spirit (we are in him). Ours is a mutual union.

It is a dependent union

Fifth, it is a dependent union. Concentrate on v. 57.

John 6:57 As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.

The union Jesus has with his people is like the union he has with his Father. This verse implies that the Son feeds on the Father. We have seen in John that Jesus lives in constant dependence on his Father. We do not have time this morning to review all the relevant verses. Just consider one.

John 5:30 "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

If Jesus as the eternal Son of God constantly depends on the Father, how much more must we in our weakness and frailty live in dependent union with Christ. We glorify him when we depend on him. When we are weak he is strong. We heard Jesus earlier in John 15:7, "Without me you can do nothing." When we

depend on ourselves, trying to prove something to God and others, we fail. When we depend on the Lord, he proves how faithful he is.

It is an exclusive union

Finally, we declare that union with Christ is an exclusive union. We have pointed this out earlier. We simply review it now. In v. 51 Jesus claims to offer himself as bread for the whole world. He is not the Savior for some people while others find another way to God. There is only one way. You cannot mix Jesus with other gods or religions. V. 53 insists that there is no life apart from this intimate, ongoing, nourishing, dependent, and mutual union with Christ. Unless you feed on him you have no life. In v. 55 he calls himself “true” food and “true” drink. All other foods are false. There is not another source of true life. You cannot enjoy true life if your diet is half-Christ and half some other Savior. Union with Christ places you in relationship with a jealous Savior. He will not share this union with another. He alone will raise you up on the last day when he is the only judge over all the earth (v. 54). As we said earlier, union with Christ is like a marriage, designed by God as the exclusive union between one man and one woman. This reflects the exclusive union of Christ and his people (Ephesians 5). At the close of John 6, Jesus declares that Judas was a devil because he would end up betraying Jesus (vv. 70-71). There is no middle ground. You are either for him or against him. You can be near him but not in union with him. Union with Christ is exclusive.

I hope you see that the theme union with Christ is all-encompassing. We have looked at just one passage and drawn attention to a few others. The pages of the Bible are overflowing with this theme. But to be aware of it and not live in it is truly tragic. You can dig a well and die of thirst if you never drink. You can know intellectually that food will nourish you and yet starve to death. Jesus lived, died, rose again, and reigns forever so that sinners like you and me might enjoy true life. Believing in Jesus is as simple as a starving man taking bread. But you must first admit that you are starving; that you cannot find life on your own. Other sources promising life have turned out to be empty calories. Take him as the only source of true life. Confess that you must feed on him from now on. Whoever you are today, I assure you, true life is union with Christ.