

2015 03 29

Mike Polioudakis

Eucharist (Holy Communion)

I want a better sense for “feeling the presence” of Jesus in the Eucharist or anywhere else. There is no particular polemical point here. If you skip down to the points numbered (1) through (3), you will get what I think. I am not interested in refuting any particular idea of the Eucharist, or any position held by any church. I want to figure out for myself what Jesus had in mind. I do not talk about the implications for what I should do because I have covered that. Likely, I am reinventing old theology but I don’t know how to look up topics in theology, I am too lazy to do so, and I want to think it out for myself anyway. I do not consider objections to my view.

In another essay, I argued that the mere presence of God, no matter how awesome, does not resolve all issues. Here I do not argue against the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. I think Jesus is present, I am just not sure how. I think Jesus is present in other scenarios too, and, again, I am not sure how. I doubt he is present in the sense argued by Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Even if Jesus is present in the Eucharist in the sense argued by them, his mere presence alone still does not resolve all issues.

Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches stress that the bread and wine really turn into the body and blood of Jesus, Jesus is “really present”, the participant really chews the body and gulps the blood, and the participant and Jesus come together (almost become one). Both follow John in his Gospel. Roman Catholics use “trans-substantiation” to explain while Orthodox Churches use “con-substantiation”. I consider the two positions essentially the same. I have sympathy for the position but they are wrong to use “substantiation”.

What the Eucharist Means to Me.

I state my ideas here for clarity. It won’t make full sense until the explanations later.

(1) In saying “this bread is my body and this wine is my blood, eat and drink this in remembrance of me” (paraphrase), Jesus meant that his life, message, ideas, acts, sayings, and dedication augment life. They are life giving. They are like the substance of life. To people who learn of God and Jesus, the message of Jesus is so important that it is hard to have a full life without it. With it, we can expect to have a relation with God. When we eat bread and drink wine, we should think about Jesus, and what Jesus means. Why we should think about Jesus and his message when we eat bread and drink wine, I explain below.

(2) Jesus’ commitment to his mission and message was strong. He willingly died. I think he knew he was going to die, and how, by the time of the Last Supper. While Jesus did not expect all his followers to die for him, he did expect strong commitment. He expected them to make his mission and message their

life's work. He expected them to give their flesh and blood to his work. To do that would make their lives meaningful and make them right with God. To do that is to take in the body and blood of Jesus. When we eat bread and drink wine, we remind ourselves of his level of dedication, the level that he expects of us, and what we can do if we are willing. To dedicate your life to his message is to eat his flesh and drink his blood, to eat his bread and drink his wine. If you eat the bread and drink the wine in the name of Jesus, you had better be ready to do the work of Jesus.

(3) In referring to the bread as flesh and the wine as blood, Jesus recalls the whole ideology of sacrifice in relation to God and especially recalls the story of Abraham and Isaac. In substituting bread and wine for flesh and blood, Jesus re-affirms the message of the story of Abraham and Isaac. God does not want human sacrifice. He does not even really want animal sacrifice. He wants commitment and good acts. Commitment to God and the message of Jesus is the appropriate sacrifice that substitutes for the bad human sacrifice of the past and for animal sacrifice. In using bread and wine for his body and blood, Jesus says we should not think of him in terms of an animal sacrifice, idolatry, or Isaac before Isaac was spared, but think of him in terms of Isaac after God spared Isaac for better things. Of course, Jesus did die, and did sacrifice himself. He knew that would happen. He wants us to see that as an example of dedication but he also wants us to look past it to the life that it affirms just as God told Abraham to look past the sacrifice of Isaac to the life that would come from Isaac.

Relevant Background about Sacrifice and Life.

I use both terms "Hebrews" and "Jews" because the people to whom they refer were not always the same. I do not here fully distinguish between Hebrews and Jews. Briefly, at first, not all Hebrews were Jews; but all Jews were Hebrews. Eventually, Hebrews that were not Jews were absorbed into Jews, so Jews and Hebrews were the same. Simply put: Hebrews were early Jews while Jews are late Hebrews. If you get confused, think of "Jews" each time I write "Hebrews".

Christians use "sacrament" for their highest ceremonies. If I recall anthropological theory correctly, "sacred" means "set apart" especially "set apart for use of a god". This idea of "sacred" is in Robertson Smith. Some Christian sacraments work that way but I don't think Eucharist works that way as its main feeling. The sense in the Eucharist is more of participation in the god, participation with other people, union with other people as a result of participating in the same thing, union with the god, union of the society (church) with god, union in the society with other people, and union of society, god, and people all at once. That sense of participation-and-union can go along with "set aside for the god". This sense of participation is not restricted to Christians but is widespread. It is not clear if the two senses (set aside and participation) go together often, when they go together, and when not. The anthropological literature is not helpful. In the sense of participating in god, the Eucharist has a Durkheimian feeling but I don't want to push that view. Christians should beware a Durkheimian view because, in it, society is god, and there is no god apart from society.

Unlike what modern people are now used to, for centuries, in many places, including England, Germany, Rome, Greece, China, India, Middle America, the Middle East, and among Hebrews and Jews, animal

sacrifice was a normal regular non-startling non-offensive part of worship. I don't try to explain why this should be so; I only describe some implications.

Among Hebrews, the blood was reserved for God. Blood represented life, and God was the God of life, the overseer, giver, and taker of life. This is why eating blood and blood products is forbidden to some Jews and Muslims and is still not common in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The meat was offered to God, partly through searing it, and then given to the priests to eat and dispense.

For Jews, a major point of a sacrifice was to "get right with God" again. I am not interested in all the ideas about what it means to be "right with God" and how sacrifice helps people "get right with God". The important points here are that getting right with God is valuable in itself and getting right with God is needed to have a full, abundant, and long life. It is for life.

Abraham founded the Hebrew religion, and so founded Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abraham likely lived sometime in the period from about 2000 to 1500 BCE (BC). Then, peoples other than the Hebrews sacrificed humans. Human sacrifice was considered the most effective. In a famous story, Abraham had only one legitimate son and heir, Isaac. God told Abraham to take Isaac to a mountain to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham obeyed. Before Abraham could kill Isaac, God intervened, told Abraham to spare Isaac, and gave Abraham a ram to kill instead. Because Abraham obeyed God, God promised to give to Abraham, through Isaac, wealth, life, and very many descendants.

I do not consider all interpretations. The meanings that concern me are: God promised Abraham the best life that people understood then. Yahweh (El) is a humane god. God banned human sacrifice, made clear that human sacrifice would be considered idolatry, made the point that he did not like it, and made clear that animal sacrifice is as good as human sacrifice. Abraham walked up the mountain an inhumane idolater and walked down the mountain a humane worshipper of a humane God.

In theory, Hebrew-Jewish law requires particular sacrifices for particular situations and offenses. Among the highest sacrifices was a cow or bull, young yet full-grown, with no blemishes, out of your own herd. In practice, Jews allow for substitutions and take account of circumstances, especially wealth and power. A poor person did not have to sacrifice as much as a rich person. Even a rich person could use a goat or sheep. The standard sacrifice for most people at the Temple in Jerusalem likely was a pair of doves bought at the Temple for that use. The idea of sacrifice became that sacrifice in itself was not magically efficacious but it showed your heart and it was a giving from yourself to a greater whole.

Eventually, Hebrews saw that animal sacrifice itself was not the key element in their relation with God. Attitude is more important than simple act. Other acts besides sacrifice can be more important. The prophet Isaiah was clear that no amount of animal sacrifice that was done without changing your heart and behavior, made any difference; no amount of animal sacrifice could compare to good deeds done with good intentions; and that people should think first about doing good deeds with good intentions than about animal sacrifice as such. God wants us to do the right things for the right reasons. Other prophets followed Isaiah.

The ideas of Isaiah definitely influenced Hebrews-Jews but Isaiah did not stop animal sacrifice. Isaiah did not want to stop animal sacrifice. He wanted it to be put in the context of something better.

Among other Jews, the Pharisees (people set apart in pursuit of purity) followed Isaiah in stressing the pursuit of being right with God even apart from the Temple and its animal sacrifices. They came to see the local synagogue and their households as “little temples” but they did not perform animal sacrifices there. They sought the same purity and “being right with God” that most Jews thought only Temple priests could achieve, and they sought it in their daily work and home lives. They saw that, to get right with God, doing good acts is as important as animal sacrifice. I do not wish to stress this point, but it is possible to say that Pharisees, and some other Jews, saw a life dedicated to God and good acts as like a strong sacrifice.

The Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE (AD), and destroyed Jerusalem and expelled Jews from the area of Jerusalem around 130 CE. Without the Temple, Jews could not perform animal sacrifices as in the traditional past, so they stopped. Mostly they took up the Pharisee model in which pursuit of the Law, to the extent that it can be practically pursued, and doing good deeds, take the place of animal sacrifice, at least until the Temple is rebuilt. In the meantime, following the Law and doing good deeds are completely adequate for being right with God.

As with many traditional agricultural and herding people, people of the traditional Middle East, including Hebrews and Jews, had a dual view of gods and of getting right with gods, especially the use of sacrifice in getting right with God(s). One way is through animals while the other way is through plants. I do not consider way which is most important or how all they relate to each other. Somewhat as a surprise to affluent Americans, few agriculturists are wealthy enough to eat meat regularly. Plants are the staple of the diet, often even among herders, in particular grains and some kind of drink. Plants, including staple grains and a drink, are the core of life, stuff of life, and staff of life. In the Middle East, and around the Mediterranean, bread and wine symbolized life and good life, and, in effect, became life and good life. If you had bread and wine, then you had life and good life. When people offered to their gods, they gave bread and wine. Think of libations in classical Greek literature. Bread and wine took much the same role that flesh and blood did.

I do not know if bread and wine ever officially substituted for flesh and blood. I do not know if peoples ever explicitly made the link between flesh-bread and blood-wine. It is easy to make this link if you live in a place where both idea sets operate. Despite urbanization, industrialization, and modern cuisine, Americans still talk of a good meal as “bread and meat”, call the core of an issue the “meat”, talk as if bread-and-meat were the same as life and a good abundant life, and still treat beer and whisky as the symbols of life and a good life. Think of an American barbecue.

Both the animal view and the plant view can be associated with dying and rising gods, but the plant view is more often associated with dying and rising gods. The traditional examples are the cult of Dionysius (Bacchus) in Greece and Rome and the worship of Isis and Osiris first in Egypt and then throughout the

Middle East. The cult of Isis and Osiris survives to this day in the reverence of Mary. The mixing of blood, flesh, bread, wine, and dying and rising god played a big part in early Christianity but I do not consider any of these topics here.

Relevant Quotes from the Gospels.

In my own words, taken from several public domain English versions of the New Testament, the relevant passages are below. Please refer to your preferred Bible translation for other wordings. Please don't email to tell me what a bad job I did because I will get criticism like that from several, often opposing, points of view.

BEGIN QUOTES

Matthew 18:20: "Wherever two or three of you are gathered together in my name, I will be there also among you".

COMMENT: This quote from Matthew should be put in a broader context to be interpreted best. The meaning that seems obvious is valid – Jesus is present among us - and I use that meaning as adequate for my needs, without reservation. The quote appears while describing proper early "church" conduct and especially how to resolve disputes between members. Jesus is like another unseen guide when two or more church members meet to settle a dispute. You should read it in this context first before making more of it. This line is often misused.

Mark 14:22 – 14:25: (The scene is the Last Supper). As they were eating, Jesus picked up some bread, blessed it, broke it, gave the pieces to his disciples, and said "Take this and eat it; it is my body". Then Jesus took the wine cup, gave thanks, and gave it to all of them, saying "All of you drink from it, because this is my blood for a new understanding (testament or covenant) between God and people, and my blood will be shed so that many people will have their sins forgiven. I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the day when I can drink it new with you in the Kingdom of God my father".

Matthew 26:26 – 26:29: (The scene is the Last Supper). As they were eating, Jesus picked up some bread, blessed it, broke it, gave the pieces to his disciples, and said "Take this and eat it; it is my body". Then Jesus took the wine cup, gave thanks, and gave it to all of them, saying "All of you drink from it, because this is my blood for a new understanding (testament or covenant) between God and people, and my blood will be shed so that many people will have their sins forgiven. I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the day when I can drink it new with you in the Kingdom of God my father".

COMMENT: The words from Mark and Matthew are nearly identical. The words from Luke are quite similar to Mark and Matthew. Likely, all were taken from a common source. The common source might have been Mark but more likely was another text from which all three borrowed, so-called "Q".

Luke 22:14 – 22:20: (The scene is the Last Supper). When the time (for Passover dinner) had come, he (Jesus) sat down and the twelve disciples were with him. Jesus said: “I have much wished to eat this meal with us all together before I suffer. I will not eat any more until my task is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.” Jesus took the cup, gave thanks, and said: “Take this and divide it among you. I am telling you that I will not drink again the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God has come.” Then he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: “This is my body that is given to you. Do this (share bread) in memory of me.” He did the same with the wine cup, saying: “This cup is the new understanding between God and people (testament or covenant), done in my blood; this wine-blood is shed for you.”

COMMENT: John is quite different from Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

BEGIN JOHN

John 6:27 – 6:40: (The scene appears to be an outdoor discussion between Jesus and other Jews, in particular including some learned Jews.) [Jesus said:] “Don’t pursue the meat that lasts only for a while and then spoils but instead go after the meat that lasts forever and gives life forever. This meat the Son of Man will give to you, because God has ‘sealed’ him (and this gift).” The followers asked what they could do to do the works of God. Jesus replied: “This is a work of God: that you believe in the person who God has sent”. The followers asked what sign Jesus could give so they could believe him, what (miracle) could he do? The followers pointed out that God gave their ancestors manna from Heaven to eat. Jesus retorted: “Truthfully I tell you, Moses did not send that bread from Heaven but my father sent the true bread from heaven. The bread from heaven is the person who comes down from heaven to give life to the world.” The followers pleaded for Jesus to give them always this bread. Jesus said to them: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never feel hunger and whoever believes in me will never feel thirst. But I say again to you that you have seen me but don’t believe me.”

John 6: 48 – 6:66: (The scene appears to be the same as 6:40 but perhaps indoors in the synagogue.) Jesus said, “I am that bread of life. Your ancestors in the wilderness ate bread (manna) from heaven and they are all dead. This (me, my message, my example) is the bread that comes down from heaven, the bread that a person can eat and never die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If any person eats this bread, he-she will live forever. The bread that I give is my flesh. I give my flesh for the life of the world.”

The Jews argued among themselves about how a man could give them his flesh to eat. Jesus said to them: “Honestly, honestly, I tell you, unless you chew the meat of the Son of Man and gulp his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever chews my meat and gulps my blood will live forever, and I will raise him-her up on the last day. My meat is real meat and my blood is real blood. Whoever chews my meat and gulps my blood lives in me, and I live in him-her. As the living Father sent me, and I live by (through) the Father, so whoever eats me will live by (through) me. This (me, my message, my example) is the living bread that came down from heaven, not like the manna that your ancestors ate and then died, because whoever eats this bread will live forever.”

This is what Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum.

Many of his followers (disciples), when they heard him say this, said, "This saying is hard. Who can hear this, understand it, and bear it?"

When Jesus heard their murmuring and saw their confusion, he said: "Does this (trifle) bother you? What if you were to see the Son of Man (me, Jesus) rise up to where he was before (that is, where he came from, that is, heaven)? The Spirit gives Life. The flesh gives no benefit. The words that I give you are the Spirit and the Life. But some of you do not believe." Jesus knew from the beginning that some would not believe him and some even betray him. So he added: "Nobody can come to me unless he is led to me by the Father."

From that time, many of his followers (disciples) turned back and did not follow him anymore.

END JOHN

END QUOTES

First Comments on the Gospels.

The line "Nobody can come to me unless he is led to me by the Father" sadly reinforced wrong ideas of predestination, human depravity, original sin, and lack of free will. The line "The flesh gives no benefit" likewise has been misunderstood and abused. These issues play no role here, but I point them out so you will not get confused by them.

In what sense is Jesus among his followers whenever two or three are gathered together? In that same sense, he is in the bread and wine when we eat and drink in remembrance of him. If he is not physically among his followers then he is not physically in the bread and wine. If he is physically in the bread and wine, then he must be physically among his followers. If the sense in which Jesus is present when two or three are gathered together differs from the sense in which Jesus is present in the bread and wine, I need an account of that situation. I need an account of how Jesus is present in each of the two cases, how the presence differs in the two cases, and-or is similar. I would like the account from an established church or from someone adept at scripture. Without such an account that is convincing to me, I have to assume Jesus is present in the same way in both cases. I take as the model for his presence the case of "two or three gathered together". Jesus is not more present in the bread and wine than he is in the case when followers of his are gathered together. That amount of presence is enough.

I believe Jesus is among his followers and Jesus is in the bread and wine but not in any usual physical sense and not in the physical sense that John said. I am not sure if Jesus is there "merely" symbolically. I don't bother to think this out or try to understand it in detail.

I think Mark, Matthew, and Luke give a fairly accurate account. I especially like that Luke has Jesus say Jesus wants the ceremony done in memory of him.

Jesus meant that his life, example, acts, and message were the bread and wine. If you do not listen to Jesus, get him, and emulate him as best you could, then your life is wasted. If you do listen, get, and emulate, then your life counts.

Here I put words in Jesus' mouth:

Jesus was continuing the tradition begun by God with Abraham and Isaac. Get beyond human sacrifice. Get to see meat-bread and blood-wine as having to do with life.

Jesus was continuing in the tradition of Jewish practice by allowing a substitute for a big blood-and-flesh sacrifice and by tailoring what was required to the situation.

Jesus was continuing the tradition stated by Isaiah. See that a good life, good deeds, and working with God are more important than even sacrifices of any kind.

Jesus was acting in the same mindset that energized the Pharisees and later unified Judaism. Anybody can be as right with God as a high priest. We can see our local temples, communities, and households as holy places where we are right with God. We need not rely on flesh-and-blood animal sacrifices. We can use good deeds instead.

Now look again at my three main interpretations of Eucharist above.

Jesus would have seen bread-is-literally-human-flesh and wine-is-literally-human-blood as a return to the mindset of pre-Isaac, as a return to human sacrifice and idolatry. Even if intent in seeing Jesus' body and blood literally in the bread and wine differs from the crass human sacrifice of non-Hebrew idolaters or differs from the mindset of Abraham before God reprieved Isaac, still, seeing Jesus' body and blood literally in the bread and wine is a return to bad inhumane non-Yahweh non-El ideas of human sacrifice.

Jesus wished to substitute more humane, more Yahweh-like, ideas of community and of a focus on God for the old ideas of animal sacrifice and human sacrifice. To do that, Jesus used images from agricultural people about bread and wine, and flesh and blood, as life. Jesus knew, from his time on, he and his message were keys to a good Godly life, so he used himself in the center of the image. Using himself in the center was not a return to bad pre-Isaac days of human and animal sacrifice. It did not necessarily mean that bread was literally human flesh or that wine was literally human blood.

Second Comments on the Gospels; Mostly on John.

Mark, Matthew, and Luke do not have Jesus promise eternal life through eating his flesh and drinking his blood; only John has Jesus promise eternal life through chewing his flesh and drinking his blood. I don't

believe we can force God to give us eternal life, not through a ritual, and especially not through a ritual of this kind. I don't believe we can understand what Jesus had in mind if we think we can use a ritual to get eternal life from God (ritual as necessary and sufficient cause) or if we have to use this ritual to get eternal life even if the ritual alone does not force God to give us eternal life (ritual necessary but not sufficient cause).

I don't believe Jesus said what John has Jesus say, with the meaning that John intended. I believe Jesus said words like those John has him say, probably at the Last Supper, and maybe also elsewhere. But I do not believe Jesus intended the words the way John has Jesus intend them. I do not believe we "chew Jesus' flesh ("sarx")" and "gulp his blood" as John says, to achieve John's stated goal of eternal life. I do not disbelieve John because I dislike cannibalism but because thinking along the lines of John clouds the mission and message of Jesus as indicated by Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

John clouds Jesus' ideas in using bread and wine by contradicting all three of my interpretations from above. John clouds over the ideas of moving from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice, substituting for animals, using bread and wine instead of meat and blood, and of using good deeds instead of sacrifice. John clouds over Jewish tradition. John clouds over Isaiah.

In particular, John's version re-institutes belief that God needs animal and human sacrifice and that people have to sacrifice literal blood and meat to God so God will give us what we need. Instead of having God have Abraham reprove Isaac, John has God have Abraham kill Isaac, and we all have to participate along with Abraham in human killing and eating. This turns the story of Isaac and Abraham on its head, and re-institutes precisely what God wished to stop. This is to turn Jesus into a god that is not Yahweh, and to institute a non-Yahweh cult around Jesus. I doubt Jesus thought God would want us to do any of this or that Jesus wanted us to do any of this. I don't like this.

If you want to be harsh, you can say John deliberately lied, and deliberately misused Jesus, to make a point that was more important to John than the true simple message of Jesus. I don't like to be harsh. John followed acceptable conventions of his time in making Jesus say, and interpreting Jesus, to make points that were important to John, and that John likely believed Jesus meant. John misled but he did not lie in the sense that modern Americans use the word "lie". Still, John is wrong.

After Jesus died, his followers were stunned and dismayed. They did not believe Jesus was wrong even if he did die. To make sense of his death, they turned it into a triumph. To turn it into a triumph, they interpreted it as a sacrifice. This view is not necessarily wrong but it is dangerous. To see it as sacrifice, they returned to pre-Isaac pre-Isaiah ideas about sacrifice and human sacrifice. This view is wrong and dangerous. I don't think that is what Jesus intended.

It helps to see how John set up and gave his argument. John differs from Mark, Matthew, and Luke in the setting(s) in which Jesus speaks. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Jesus speaks at the Last Supper to his disciples. Although he spoke only to them there, I do not think Jesus intended that only his disciples should remember him and feel his presence when they ate bread and drank wine. I do not think Jesus

intended that only the receivers of apostolic succession (bishops) should remember him and feel his presence as they eat bread and wine. I think Jesus intended to set up a regular ceremonial-ritual for most of his followers, as has in fact been done by the Christian Churches. I cannot tell from what is written in Mark, Matthew, and Luke what Jesus had in mind for this event, how often, in what context, and with what meanings. That is not at issue here except as it might bear on how Jesus intended us to think of him as present when his followers ate bread and drank wine in remembrance of him; and that is a problem for various churches. I have explained how I view Jesus' intent.

In John, Jesus seems to explain twice. Both times, Jesus explains more in public than in the intimate Last Supper meal as in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Jesus' audiences are, first, Jews who will not accept him at all; and, second, followers who can accept a meaning somewhat like I do and can accept a meaning that is present in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, but cannot accept the meaning from John. The scene of the second explanation is private compared to the first explanation but not intimate as it is with the scene in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Rather, the second scene is like a heated discussion within a private meeting of a private club. John uses Jesus' drama to make points about different groups and about distinctions between groups. John wants to distinguish his group from Jews in general who cannot accept Jesus as coming from God (or as God) and John wants to distinguish his group of Jesus followers from other followers who do accept Jesus as from God but do not see him as John's group sees him.

If Jesus taught about bread, wine, flesh, and blood in public and semi-public-semi-private as John says, then the first episode of John's story has some merit, in which people were offended that Jesus held himself up as the source of ideas and as the lifestyle that we had to listen to, get, and emulate. Unless we act like Jesus, unless we come to grips with Jesus and his message, we will not have the favor of God. Listeners objected to the high position that Jesus gave himself and his message. I understand their view. Looking back, I can say I accept Jesus and his message. If I were there then, I likely would have objected as well. I would have thought that a new Jesus was diminishing the old Jesus (Moses) and claiming too much direct access to God. I would have been wrong. I like to say to myself that I would be better than "them" but that likely is not true.

John is really all about the second issue and second venue. In John, the key objection to bread-as-body and wine-as-blood came later and the objectors were not the people (Jews) in general but some of Jesus' own followers. John says they did not like chewing a man's flesh and swallowing his blood, even as a way to get eternal life. I don't think people objected to Jesus saying this because I don't think Jesus said this. These objections to chewing and gulping came later when John and his group put the bread and wine in those terms. John said in effect: "Either you see the ceremony of bread and wine in my terms or you don't get to participate in the ceremony of bread and wine at all, you don't get to see the bread and wine as a source of life, and you don't get eternal life". People (some followers of Jesus) objected to the idea of Jesus as bread and wine, body and flesh, when some (other) disciples of Jesus, such as John, later (mis)-interpreted Jesus as John (mis)-interpreted Jesus. I object also.

Jesus did not need to go beyond the meaning of bread and wine as the staff (stuff) of life, beyond Mark, Matthew, and Luke, as John has Jesus do in the second part of the passages from John. I don't think

Jesus expected bread to turn into literal flesh and wine to turn into literal blood. The bread is like his deeds and the wine is like his words. That is a lot already. If you can eat and drink that, then you have a good shot at knowing God loves you and doing as Jesus taught.

To get a sense of what Jesus meant in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, and why John goes against this sense, transfer the idea to the modern world and modern foods. In the modern world, we can substitute any solid and liquid food that is important in our life and that we see as the source of life and good life. In Asia, people might use rice, fish, and tea or rice, fish, and sake. In America, people might use cold cereal and milk in the morning, meat loaf and milk at night, pizza and beer, steak and wine, or whole grains and organic milk. When you eat pizza and drink beer, if you think of Jesus and commit to him, then you are eating the flesh of Jesus and drinking his blood. When you eat the foundation foods of life, then you also need to take in the ideas, message, acts, and total life of Jesus to really have a full life. Jesus is to the full spiritual life as pizza and beer, grains and milk, are to the healthy physical life. Mark, Matthew, and Luke have Jesus teach this lesson at the Last Supper.

The fact that John differs from the other Gospels strengthens my feeling that John distorted events to make a message that was important to John rather than to Jesus.

John deliberately exaggerated the idea of chewing on flesh and swallowing blood so John and his group could separate some people from others. I don't think Jesus would have wanted that.

Why-and-how did John change Jesus' message to emphasize literally chewing human flesh and drinking human blood as a way to separate groups?

It helps to know that, in Syria where John wrote, John's group likely represented a moderate centrist opinion. On the one hand were followers of Jesus who saw him in human terms, as I do, and who saw bread and wine much as I do. On the other hand were followers who saw Jesus as entirely-and-only divine without flesh and blood as we know them. They would have interpreted the bread and wine in flighty mystical terms that I don't want to guess at here. John was trying to find a middle ground that preserved Jesus' divinity and his role as the incarnation of divine principles (the Word) but preserved them in the right context. That is why he appealed so much to the early Church and why he has kept such a strong influence. His moderate-position-in-his-context still does not make John right. I still think John is wrong. Being moderate in your errors does not make you right. Sometimes the best defense against a wacky error is not a moderate error but simple truth. Sometimes a moderate error ultimately clouds and misleads even more than an obvious wacky error.

Groups often have two levels of initiation, one public and one private – think of the military or a band. The public rite is usually fairly easy to do, easy to understand, benign, and presents the group in a good light. The private rite is usually hard to do, hard to understand, mystic and magical, is not benign but asks for hard acts and hard ideas, and presents the group as needing cohesion within itself and needing separation from other groups.

When following Jesus began, the first followers had a public initiation in baptism. I don't know if they had a private initiation then. By the time John wrote, likely after 90 CE and before 110 CE, Christians had the standard two levels. The public initiation was still baptism. The private initiation was the "Love Dinner" or "Love Feast" in which Christians re-enacted the Last Supper. Followers had to interpret the inner initiation rite. Followers had to worry about the scrutiny of the greater public and the scrutiny of the authorities. Followers had divided into distinct groups. Groups bolstered their position and they undermined the position of other groups through their interpretations of the inner initiation rite of eating bread and drinking wine. Whichever group could impose their interpretation of eating bread and drinking wine would capture most of the followers of Jesus. Groups had to offer an interpretation that was consistent with most of the other teachings of Jesus, gave followers a lot if they accepted it, and cut off other followers who did not accept it.

John wrote as he did to bolster his version of a powerful second, inner, private initiation rite. John and his group made the Last Supper into their version of an inner private initiation rite. John deliberately wanted to put off people who could not accept the authority of John's group. John used Jesus' fairly clear image about accepting his person, his life, his acts, and his message, and John twisted the image to use as a tool in group dynamics. John's version was powerful and appealing because it was tied to ideas of eternal life and to Jesus as Incarnate Word – like an avatar or bodhisattva. Eventually John's group won, likely because John's interpretation of the bread and wine did make for strong in-group cohesion and out-group exclusion. If you did not accept John's ideas of the bread and wine, then you could not participate in the bread and wine at all; if you could not participate in the bread and wine at all, you might as well not follow Jesus. Either you accept John's ideas or you cannot follow Jesus. John likely did not originate these ideas about Jesus, bread, wine, flesh, blood, chewing, swallowing, eternal life, or literal presence. The ideas and their use as a tactic in group dynamics likely predated John. John wrote the ideas skillfully and made them part of a greater cosmology. I still doubt Jesus would approve.

Eventually the Christian Church adopted the view of John's group. That is the orthodox view today.

My account does not necessarily mean that John's additions to Mark, Matthew, and Luke are wrong; but it does mean you should think about the issues yourself. John might have been right. Use the guidance of your church, traditional Christian writings, and scholarship about the Bible and early Jesus movement, when thinking out this issue.

As a result of the practices that led to John's writing, non-Christians accused early Christians of being cannibals, killing babies, and eating babies. The non-Christians were wrong, but their misunderstanding shows how misleading John's ideas are.

Substantiation.

The next few paragraphs are about "substantiation" and so might be boring.

We only need something like substantiation if we follow John's ideas about bread and wine, which I do not. I reject substantiation mostly because I think it is wrong in the light of modern science but I also reject it for its support of John. I do not reject it as an indirect devious way of rejecting John.

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians know that the bread given in the Eucharist does not turn into red animal meat and know that the wine does not turn into warm blood. The bread and wine do not taste like meat and blood. If someone who ate them were forced to vomit, he-she would not vomit out meat and blood but bread and wine. (In the early days of Christianity, its opponents might have actually carried out this grisly experiment.) A scientific chemical examination would not find meat and blood but bread and wine. This result does not invalidate the position of the churches. This result does require that churches offer an explanation for how this apparent external result can be the case if the bread and wine really internally change into flesh and blood. The explanation that has been offered in the West at least since about 1200 is "trans-substantiation". In the East, the explanation is "con-substantiation", and I don't know how long it has been offered. I take the two as similar enough to treat as one. Explanations based on substantiation do not hold up. The failure of explanations based on substantiation does not mean Jesus is not present in the Eucharist as taught by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. The failure does mean that Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches need to look for a different basis for their explanations.

The idea of substantiation is undercut by the atomic theory of matter. That the atomic theory undercuts the idea of substantiation was suspected from at least the time of Galileo (before 1600). Atomism and its implied assault on substantiation might have been a motive for charging Galileo. Since Galileo's time, substantiation theorists have had time to work out relations between atomism and substantiation but I am not aware of their work.

To properly undermine the idea of substantiation, I should explain it thoroughly and fairly. To do that takes a lot of space, which would be deadly boring; and I don't feel like it. I will try to get the idea across with examples. The idea of substantiation was from Classical Greek philosophy and was developed in the Middle Ages. It is used to explain how a thing is itself, is not another thing, differs from other things, has the features it has, and has features sometimes but not always. It was used to explain consistency in one thing and variety between things. It was used to explain the difference between a thing and its features. It was used to explain the difference between essential features and non-essential features. The idea of was developed before Christian theologians tried to explain the Eucharist. It was not made up to explain the Eucharist. People who wanted to explain the Eucharist took the best ideas at the time and put them to good use. Now we have better ideas.

In "trans-substantiation" and "con-substantiation", the idea of "substantiation" meant that the outside appearance of bread and wine remains the same but the inside substances-essences of bread and wine change to the substances-essences of the body and blood of Jesus.

Let us call maple wood a substance. Maple wood has some features that are essential to the fact that it is wood and not something else like iron or water, such as being made of condensed cellulose, a certain

grain, a certain hardness, and a certain range of natural colors. Maple wood also has some features that are essential to the fact that it is maple wood and not some other kind of wood, such as a particular kind of grain, a particular range of colors, and a particular smell. Particular instances of maple wood can have features that are not essential to its identity either as wood or as maple wood: it can be inside a tree or outside a tree; it can be shaped like Abraham Lincoln or like poker chips; it can be dyed to look like walnut or like cherry; it can be on fire; it can be hot or cold; and it can be in a big block or in small bits of sawdust.

What allows all these features to cohere together in one thing? What allows us to separate essential features from accidental features? They all “belong to” or “stick on to” some underlying substance. The underlying substance accepts or denies some features. It accepts or denies some features as essential. It accepts or denies some features as accidental. The word “substance” in fact means “underlying thing” or “that which underlies”. I cannot go into more details. The substance is what really counts.

Bread and wine each have their own substance, essential features, and accidental features. Jesus’ flesh and blood each have their own substance, essential features, and accidental features. In the case of trans-substantiation and con-substantiation, it is convenient to look at all the features as if they were accidental rather than essential. In the theory of con-substantiation, the underlying substance of Jesus’ flesh is added to the underlying substance of the bread and the underlying substance of Jesus’ blood is added to the underlying substance of the wine. In the theory of trans-substantiation, the underlying substance of Jesus’ flesh is substituted for the underlying substance of the bread while the underlying substance of Jesus’ blood is substituted for the underlying substance of the wine. In either theory, the underlying substance changes but the external features remain the same. The substance of wine turns into the substance of Jesus’ blood even though the external features still make it look and taste like wine. The substance of bread turns into the substance of Jesus’ meat even though the external features make it look and taste like bread.

This idea might have worked in 1200 CE (AD) but it can’t work now, for many reasons that I can’t all go into here. The easiest reason is that scientists no longer believe in the idea of substance, attributes, essential attributes, and accidental attributes. I don’t go into what scientists believe except to say that ideas of particles, atoms, and their relations are central to the new view. The ideas of substance and attributes are no longer needed, and are conducive to mistakes. It is better to forget them. It is dimly possible to merge the old ideas of substance-and-attributes with modern ideas of particles and atoms but that merger is not convincing and so I don’t go into it here.

Suppose Theodore wants to salvage the idea of “substantiation” by mixing it with modern ideas of particles and atoms. What does Theodore say? Maybe the atoms that make up the bread are quietly replaced by atoms that once made up the flesh of Jesus and the atoms that make up the wine are quietly replaced by atoms that once made up the blood of Jesus. Among the problems with this way of saving traditional theology, here are two:

First, changing atoms does not change substance. Suppose we could quietly replace all the atoms in a piece of maple wood with atoms that had once been part of pine wood. So what? We couldn't tell. The maple wood would not stop being maple wood. The maple wood would not mysteriously become pine wood. It makes no sense to speak of substance. Substance is not useful and it is misleading.

Second, think about the total number of atoms that were ever in Jesus' body and blood versus the total number of atoms that have ever been used to make bread and wine for the Eucharist. Every week, more total amount of bread and wine (more total atoms) are used for Eucharist than were ever in Jesus' body and blood during his whole lifetime. There are not enough privileged once-were-Jesus atoms to use to make up all the bread and wine that are needed for Eucharist every week let alone in the entire history of the Christian churches.

I can't think of any way to merge the old ideas based on substance with new ideas based on particles and atoms.

I can't think of any way, based on modern ideas of particles and atoms, to make up ideas about bread literally becoming Jesus' flesh and wine literally becoming Jesus' blood. Modern ideas about particles and atoms simply will not support that kind of changing.

This result does not mean that the idea of Jesus being present when we eat bread and drink wine, or eat any solid food and drink any liquid, when we pursue good life along the lines of Jesus and his message, does not have any merit. The idea still makes sense in the way that Mark, Matthew, and Luke offer the idea. It makes sense in the way that Jesus is among his followers when they gather. I hope Christian churches come up with plausible explanations that take into account how modern science defines the arena within which the explanations have to work.