

THIS IS MY BODY

Evan A. Fry, Radio Minister
 Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ
 of Latter Day Saints
 Independence, Missouri

All Rights Reserved

SCRIPTURE: John 6:48-58

I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.

Take, eat; This is my body.

One of the most frequently encountered and most important problems of scriptural interpretations is the problem of knowing when to interpret Biblical statements literally, and when to interpret them spiritually, metaphorically, or allegorically. Sometimes, there is no problem at all. For example, when Jesus said, "I am the door," he obviously did not mean that he was a slab of wood hung on hinges. When he said, "I am the Good Shepherd," it seems logical to assume that he was speaking metaphorically, for there is no historical evidence that he ever tended sheep. When he said, "I am the vine; ye are the branches," no one is foolish enough to believe that he was a grape-producing plant. We naturally assume that Jesus was speaking in metaphors.

When we consider some other sayings of Jesus, there is quite a different story, and wide disagreement as to whether Jesus was speaking in metaphors or speaking literally. For example, when at the last supper he broke bread and gave it to his apostles to eat, he said, "Take, eat; this is my body." During much of the time since that event the Christian world has been divided into three principal schools of thought. There are those who believe in transubstantiation -- who believe that the sacramental bread is supernaturally changed into the actual, literal, physical body of Christ, though its form and appearance remain unchanged. Second, there are the con-substantiationists, who believe that the body of Christ is present in and with the bread; or in other words, that Christ's body and the bread exist simultaneously in the form of the bread. And then there is a third school of thought which sees in the statement "This is my body" only a metaphor, and in the bread only a symbol by which Christ's body is memorialized and held forever in remembrance.

This difficult statement, "This is my body," is a literal translation from the Greek, in which the verb "is" does appear. According to the Interpreter's Bible, however, the verb "is" would not be expressed in the original Aramic -- the language in which Jesus spoke. Therefore, those who interpret the saying "This is my body" metaphorically in the belief that the communion meal is principally a memorial, supply the verb "means" instead of "is," making the verse read, "This means my body." It is thus rendered in Moffat's modern translation.

Matthew and Mark say nothing about the memorial character of the communion meal. Luke, after using exactly the same phrase, "This is my body," adds: "which is given for you; this do in remembrance of me." Paul's description of the first communion

service, which is more complete than any account in the four gospels, is found in the eleventh chapter of First Corinthians. This account stresses the memorial character of the observance by quoting Jesus as saying of both the bread and wine, "This do in remembrance (or for a remembrance) of me."

Further insight into the problem of interpretation involved here may be had by studying the 6th chapter of the gospel of John, part of which we have already read as a scripture lesson. In some ways, this passage only poses more difficult problems, because in it Jesus is quoted as saying "I am the bread of life;" "I am the living bread which came down from heaven;" and "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." Does this actually mean that Christians must eat the physical body and drink the physical blood of Jesus, or die? If so, then we are forced into a belief in transubstantiation, or a belief in some supernatural, magical process which will change bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Jesus; for obviously there was not enough material in the body he took to the cross to supply communion to millions of Christians. Furthermore, the body which was nailed to the cross was resurrected and received into heaven, and therefore could not have been literally eaten.

Jesus said (John 6:33) "The bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world;" and again in verse 51, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven." Was it Jesus' body which came down from heaven? Certainly not. His body was formed of earth, just as your body and mine are made of earth. It was his Spirit which came down from heaven. It is his Spirit, his Word, his life, which is the bread of heaven -- the bread of life -- and not his physical body.

Consider also how repugnant the thought of eating human flesh and drinking human blood would have been to the Jewish instincts of the apostles. Some of Judaism's most strict dietary laws prohibit the eating of unclean meats, or the use of blood in any form as human food. Jesus and the apostles were all Jews. Does it seem reasonable that he would offer them his literal body and blood as food, knowing the prejudice against such things that had been born and bred in them? No, it seems more reasonable to suppose that here Jesus was again speaking in metaphors, as he was when he said "I am the Door," "I am the Good Shepherd," "I am the vine," or "I am the way."

The flesh and blood which we must eat and drink if we are to have the life of Christ in us, is spiritual, not physical. It is that part of Jesus which came down from heaven, not that part which was born of his mother Mary. It is not made of earthy, physical substance, as bread is, or as manna was, but of spiritual substance. The bread and wine of the communion meal symbolize not only the physical body and blood which were offered on Calvary's cross as a last, final, and infinite sacrifice for the sins of the world, but it represents the life-giving forces from above which quicken us who are dead in trespasses and sins, and which will some day quicken our physical bodies in the resurrection, bringing us the more abundant life of Christ's triumphant kingdom on earth.

In the physical body, the individual cells are nourished, cleansed, strengthened, and continually revitalized by the food which is supplied to the body, and by the blood stream which carries this food to the individual cells. As long as the cell remains in the body, a functional part of the body, it receives of the body's life and nourishment in unfailing supply through the blood of the body. But if the individual cell tries to live its own life, apart from the life of the body, it dies. It needs a higher life than its own. It needs strengths, forces, and processes which are beyond its capabilities to produce.

The life of Christ comes from above. It is available to men through the ordinances of his body -- the church. Without faith which leads to union with this body of Christ, without repentance, baptism, and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the life of Christ cannot dwell in man. Without a functional attachment to the body of Christ, no man can receive of that unceasing flow of life, of strength, of nourishment, of sustenance. That life is available only in and through the body. When we partake of the bread and wine, we do so in memory of Christ's body and blood, spent for us that we might have this new life; in memory of the covenant we have made to remember him and keep his commandments, that we may have his life-giving Spirit to be with us; in member of his body, the church, through which this gift of life is ministered.