

This paper will present an exegetical summary of John chapter six specifically showing through theological insights that this passage supports the practice of open communion. The reason for this topic is that some denominations, such as the Eastern Orthodox, hold to closed communion in light of their exegetical work on this chapter. The purpose of this paper is to determine whether that statement is legitimate or if in fact this chapter of John's gospel gives the strongest argument for open communion. The essay will first look at some of the sacramental views on chapter six of John's gospel and will then take a look at the historical and literal context in light of these views. To conclude the argument, the essay will focus on verses 51-58, where Jesus specifically invites all men to partake in His life through eating of the flesh and drinking of the blood.

To begin with it is important to discuss the theological difficulties concerning John's gospel and the two sacraments, baptism and Eucharist. G.R. Beasley-Murray states in his book *Gospel of Life* that there are three main views regarding whether or not the Gospel of John includes or discusses the two sacraments. The first view contains the argument that "the fourth evangelist is either not interested in the sacraments or hostile to them."<sup>1</sup> This view holds "that chapter six is claimed to originally be without reference to the Lord's Supper until verses 51-58 were added...with the explanation that in the description of the last supper that there was no mention of the Passover, the bread or wine in JN ch 13."<sup>2</sup> This view is supported by and expressed in detail by Bultmann and Kysar. The second view is regarding "those who hold that John was profoundly interested in the sacraments."<sup>3</sup> Those who hold this view state that it is not

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<sup>1</sup>G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody: Hendrickson Press, 1991), 85.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 85-86.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 86.

only in this passage that John speaks of communion but rather that is immersed throughout the whole gospel. The main supporter of this view is Cullmann, though R. Brown sates that at some points Cullmann pushes the boundaries.

The third view states that, "John did value the sacraments but his chief concern was to demonstrate their relation to Christ. He (John) introduced them in an indirect manner as to highlight their significance for the understanding of Jesus as redeemer and the believer's total dependence on him for the obtaining of the life to which they bear witness."<sup>4</sup> Beasley-Murray, who holds to this view, sums it up succinctly by saying that, "instead of repeating the brief words of the institution known throughout the churches, he chose to reproduce *teaching that gave their meaning*."<sup>5</sup> Before jumping to the view that best fits ones denominational inklings or that seems to back up ones argument of agenda from John chapter six, one must ask what clues there are from the whole Gospel that help shed light on the view that one of John's themes in his gospel actually speaks to the sacraments. These clues should not just affirm the sacraments but should also help in understanding their deep spiritual meaning.

There is not one book or commentary on the Gospel of John that would not be in agreement with the statement that this gospel is different from the preceding three synoptic gospels. There are many discussions of how and why this gospel is different, even to the effect that a few theologians do not even like to refer to it as a synoptic gospel. R.E. Brown's *Introduction to the New Testament* gives one of the better descriptions of the variety of stylistic features that we read in John that are not found in the other gospels. Brown says that "style and

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 88.

theology are intimately wedded in each of the six features"<sup>6</sup> that are found in John. The features are as follows: poetic format, misunderstanding, twofold meanings, irony, inclusions and transitions, and lastly, parentheses or footnotes.<sup>7</sup>

There is not space here to show how each of these relate to chapter six of John,<sup>8</sup> but the two most insightful are misunderstandings and inclusions and transitions. Roy Zuck explains the misunderstandings as "wordplays that have double meaning."<sup>9</sup> Mentioning that "to get his theological point across John often combined the use of double meanings with the "misunderstood statement"—a statement made by Jesus which was taken by His hearers to refer to an earthly situation, while Jesus really spoke of a heavenly or eternal truth."<sup>10</sup> Chapter six of John is a long chapter; in fact it is the longest of all the chapters in this gospel. The main exegetical work for understanding the Eucharist comes through looking at verses 51-58, but the best way for intelligent insight into these verses can only come out of the context from which they are written. Here the beauty of John's style and theology of merging earthy concepts to heavenly reality comes into play.

The account of Jesus feeding the 5,000 can be compared to God providing manna to the Israelites in the book of Exodus. John describes how Jesus is the heavenly reality because He himself is the true bread from heaven. It is interesting to note that the feeding of the 5,000 is one

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<sup>6</sup>R.E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 333.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 333-337.

<sup>8</sup>For further analysis refer to these sources on stylistic features pertaining to John chapter 6: Dodd *Theology of Fourth Gospel*, 333-345, Brown *Introduction to the New Testament*, 333-337 and Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, 168f.

<sup>9</sup>Roy B. Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 169.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 169.

of the accounts that is recorded in all four gospels. Why? What makes this account so significant that all the gospels include it? Perhaps John has written the best explanation of the importance of this event and of all the signs and wonders events that Jesus performed. In verse 26 and following Jesus rebukes his followers for seeking Him because of what He did, not for who He was. They wanted more signs and wonders and yet if they would have believed in the person of Jesus, they would have gained eternal life-not just perishable experiences. Believing in Christ and entering into eternal life means participating in the very life of Christ. This sets the stage for Christ's discourse on eating flesh and drinking blood, which will be looked at in more detail in later paragraphs.

Concerning the stylistic feature of inclusions and transitions, Brown mentions how "the careful structure of the gospel is indicated by certain techniques. By inclusion we mean that John mentions a detail (or makes allusion) at the end of a section that matches a similar detail at the beginning of the section. This is a way of packing sections by tying together the beginning and the end."<sup>11</sup> With these features in mind I propose that there is a connection between John chapter three, as used in some traditions as John's baptismal account, and John chapter six, used as his Eucharistic account. There are many similar details in both chapters that speak of a heavenly truth using earthly concepts, mainly drawing from the Passover and its significance at the heart of both of these chapters.

Both of Jesus' discourses in chapters three and six mention the Old Testament accounts of Moses and the Exodus as Jesus explains the theological implication of each. The interesting thing to note is that the basis for both is the essence of eternal life. In Bruce Waltke's *Theology*

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<sup>11</sup>R.E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 336.

*of the Old Testament* he mentions how "Isaiah speaks of a new Exodus that is yet to come and that in the Gospels they see our salvation through Jesus as a spiritual exodus and conquest of the new land, in experiencing eternal life now in the present."<sup>12</sup> The significance of the Exodus fulfillment told in John six is that everything is now heightened from the previous story. The Israelites followed Moses because of the plagues he brought on Pharaoh and the Egyptians, just like the crowds in the first century followed Jesus because of his signs. Both groups were fed by food that was provided in a supernatural way. In the first story the food was physical in that it had to be gathered and eaten each day. In the case of Jesus, he was offering spiritual food so that man would never hunger again. In reading and studying the John six passage, it is interesting to note that the little story of Jesus walking on water seems to be stuck in the middle. Since it is being compared to the midst of a heightened Exodus narrative it brings to mind the Red Sea crossing. However, in John's gospel the Sea does not need to be parted for the people to get across to the other side. Jesus simply walks on top of it, staying as dry as a bone. The point made from using the heightened Moses narratives is that Jesus is God and He is that which came down from heaven to give life eternal to those who partake in the everlasting Godhead.

Another comparison to make is that both chapters three and six are said to have taken place during the feast of Passover. I believe that it is only in light of the Passover festival that one can understand the significance of Jesus' answers in both accounts and therefore can see the theological implication that John is indeed concerned with the sacraments. In his commentary on John, Keener suggests that, "one read both passages in light of the impending Passover; Jesus encounters rejection in both passages because he defies traditional expectations of his messianic

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<sup>12</sup>Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 141. Also refer to Rikk Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*.

role. Passover was associated with hopes for a new eschatological redemption."<sup>13</sup> This is the crux of what Jesus is saying. He has now in fact fulfilled that which the Passover represents. It is now fulfilled in a new way through the symbol of initiation in baptism through water and the Spirit and in participation of the feasting on Christ for the sustenance of life. Do we not also experience the eschatological redemption as signified in the old rite of the Passover feast through these new rites as we await the Second Advent? "The *Maranatha* is to be understood in a double sense: it is a prayer for the parousia (Come, Lord!), and a confession of the Lord's sacramental advent in the Eucharist (the Lord has come!)." <sup>14</sup>

A third observation regarding John's explanation of the sacraments in chapters three and six takes into account similar parallel phrases, words and actions that lead up to a discourse from Jesus. In John 2:18 the Jews say to Jesus, "what sign do you show us for doing these things?" In John 6:30 the crowd says, "then what sign do you do that we might see and believe you?" Neither of the answers that Jesus gave to the people is received well. In chapter two the Jews see Jesus as a lunatic and in the secret of the night Nicodemus, a leading Jewish ruler, finally gathers the courage to question Jesus and receives teaching that he cannot fully comprehend. Likewise the answer Jesus gave in chapter six turned many of the disciples away because they could not understand what he was talking about. Could it be that those who heard these words and saw these signs were only thinking in terms of immediate personal gain rather than spiritual and physical hope for the future?

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<sup>13</sup> C. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 665.

<sup>14</sup>G. Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 68.

There is another significant relationship between these two chapters in John. It is in the use of the word sign. In both accounts a physical sign is given to the people but there is also a sign given to symbolize the new creation in Christ. In D.A. Carson's commentary on John he lists seven sign's with seven discourses that precede them.<sup>15</sup> R. Brown in his commentary calls John the book of signs.<sup>16</sup> The Greek word John uses for sign is σημεῖον. The basic definition of the word is a "sign, mark, token, miracle with a spiritual end and purpose. Miracles which lead to something out of and beyond themselves; finger-marks of God, valuable not so much for what they are as for what they indicate of the grace and power of the Doer."<sup>17</sup> What makes σημεῖον so important in the book of John is that in chapter 20:30-31 he gives us the purpose of writing the gospel by saying "that there were many signs not recorded, but these were written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the son of God". The *TDNT* states how in the gospel of John there is a specific typological character of the word σημεῖον. It states that,

He [John] also gave the term a typological accent within his picture of Christ, and this with emphatic reference to the faith or unbelief of those whom Jesus addresses as Revealer. In this regard two aspects seem to be particularly important to him: the description of Jesus as the "prophet" on the one side and His divine foreordination as the Passover Lamb of eschatological redemption on the other. These are interrelated inasmuch as the age of Moses with the redemption from bondage in Egypt acquires typological force in both. In this framework the σημεῖα of Jesus also takes on typological significance. Once the Baptist has proclaimed the imminence of the second and final age of Passover and redemption they form the prelude to this as the signs in Egypt did to the redemption from bondage to the Egyptian. At the same time, however, the σημεῖα which Jesus does show that the age of Moses is not just repeated in Him; it is surpassed in Him as He Himself in His person and in what He brings infinitely surpasses Moses, Jn. 1:17. With their typological emphasis, then, the σημεῖα of Jesus in John acquire enhanced

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<sup>15</sup>D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1991), 247.

<sup>16</sup>R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978), XI.

<sup>17</sup>Zodhiates, Spiros, ed. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), S G4592.

Christological significance and herein also very considerable theological significance. Against the background of the Mosaic age they make it apparent for all to see that Jesus is in fact more than a new Moses. For Jesus acts as God, and therein He shows Himself to be the Son of God.<sup>18</sup>

As noted in the previous paragraph, in both passages the crowd asks Jesus for a sign. His answer is completely misunderstood because what Jesus gives them as an answer is His very self and His spirit of eternal life. In light of the insights given to these chapters it is now appropriate to get a closer look at John 6:51-58 and its connection to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

In my own personal conversion and even up to this point of my life one of the hardest doctrinal statements of the church for me to understand is that of transubstantiation. It is here in these few verses of John that the churches that hold the view that they eat the body of Christ and drink his blood base their argument. And is that not exactly what Jesus said to do, with so much emphasis that if one does *not* eat it then he or she will not enter into eternal life? As described in the previous paragraph, the gospel of John is full of signs and symbolism. Dodd comments on the symbolism in John's gospel by saying that,

We can understand his characteristic use of symbolism in the way in which the symbol is absorbed into the reality it signifies. Bread, wine, water, light are not mere illustrations or analogies...In using the symbols of bread and water he has given not fictitious pictures, but, ostensibly at least, accounts of historical incidents: the feeding of the multitude...The feeding of the multitude with loaves *is* the nurturing of the soul with life eternal, for Christ who gives the bread *is* the bread of life. There is the same intrinsic unity of symbol and thing signified.<sup>19</sup>

If the symbol is absorbed into the reality, then the bread really *is* Christ. In light of this my question becomes, is there a difference between "real presence" and "literal eating of flesh"?

Can the answer to this be derived from verses 51-58 alone?

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<sup>18</sup> Kittel, Gerhard, Geoffrey Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), S. 7:257.

<sup>19</sup>C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), 140.



There is a group of theologians who say that John was a-sacramentalist, a view based on the fact that the sacraments were not important to John because he did not record the Last Supper in his passion narrative. This perspective would lead one to believe that John is not referring to the Eucharist in chapter six. In this case one would not eat Christ's flesh because Christ says nothing of the sort in the synoptic discourses of the Last Supper no matter what John records Jesus saying in chapter six. In contrast to this view "John not only omits the final paschal meal in his passion narrative; he makes Jesus' actual death the real Passover. The Lord's Supper initially pointed to Jesus' death and understood it in light of the paschal imagery. In the context of the entire gospel John's Eucharistic language thus applies directly to Jesus' death; the way one partakes is through faith and the spirit."<sup>20</sup> The point being that John is looking to "prompt the reader to look behind the Eucharist, to that which the Eucharist itself points."<sup>21</sup> Here is where one must tread lightly. While John *does* point to a deeper meaning of the Eucharist he does not point behind it in such a way that dumbs down the substance that is being pointed to. This line of thinking leads to a belief that the substance is *merely* a symbol simply because it is hard to understand, thus making it not real.

In my opinion, the best treaties on the significance of sacrament, symbol and the debate over real presence are by Schmemmann in *For the Life of the World*. He states that St. Maximus calls the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist "symbols", "images" and "mysteries". "Symbolical here is not only opposed to "real" but embodies it as its very expression and mode of manifestation. The difference is primarily a difference in the apprehension of reality itself...the symbol being not only the way to perceive and understand reality, a means of

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<sup>20</sup> C. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 690.

<sup>21</sup>D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 297.

cognition, but also a means of participation."<sup>22</sup> When the thing that *is* becomes the thing which *is symbolized* the act can only come to fruition through participation in the thing that is symbolized. Christ can take bread and say ‘this is my body’ and as one eats it he or she is now in participation in the Life that it represents. The *is* is the real presence of Christ, not in the practice of cannibalism, but in participation with what the bread now signifies, which is the life of Christ.

Having looked into the unique style of writing in John’s gospel, studying the parallel phrases and words, extracting the heavenly realities from the earthly examples and coming to an understanding of the gift of awe inspired participation, it is now time to take a look at the question of open or closed communion. John records the account of Jesus' sign of feeding the 5,000 during the feast of the Passover. Schnackenburg mentions how John could have recorded this story at any time but chose to during Passover because the Jews were waiting for the promised prophet who was going to come at Passover and give them once again the bread from heaven.<sup>23</sup> One of texts that the Jews would read during this feast was Psalm 78, which was also the text that the Jews in John six (verse 30) quoted when questioning Jesus by saying, "what sign to you give that we might believe you? Our fathers ate for it is written ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’" One important aspect to understand in looking at the Exodus 16 and Psalm 78 passages in conjunction with open communion is concerning the bread given to the people. It is a fact that the bread was given to the people despite their un-belief. The bread that fell from heaven did not just fall and land in front of Moses, Caleb, Aaron and those who believed. Psalm 78:21-28 says,

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<sup>22</sup>A. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 139.

<sup>23</sup>R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 14.

When the Lord heard them, he was furious; his fire broke out against Jacob, and his wrath rose against Israel, for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance. Yet he gave a command to the skies above and opened the doors of the heavens; he rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grain of heaven. Human beings ate the bread of angels; he sent them all the food they could eat. He let loose the east wind from the heavens and by his power made the south wind blow. He rained meat down on them like dust, birds like sand on the seashore. He made them come down inside their camp, all around their tents.

Jesus knew that the Jews in His day were only seeking food that perished, that which would merely satisfy their immediate craving, just as their fore-fathers had. This gives clarity to why the manna from heaven would only last for that day, but now it is heightened by Christ saying that those who eat the true Bread from heaven will hunger no more. The point that I am attempting to show is that the bread from heaven was not special, reserved bread that came down to a select few. It actually came upon those who did not believe. Yet, in God's great mercy they might believe because of His provision for them to live. So then, why have closed communion when you, I or the Church are not really the ones who provide the bread and the wine?

Again looking at John six (verse 51) Jesus states that His flesh is "for the life of the world"; we can begin to see that the Eucharist has missional value. And if communion has missional value than it must be for all people, especially those who come into the house that provides the meal. Thus, as Wainwright says after commenting on the mission of Eucharist, "when a state of Christian disunity obliges us to chose between a particular pattern of internal order and the missionary witness to the kingdom to be made before the world, eschatology then compels us to chose missionary witness, and that means intercommunion."<sup>24</sup>

One more illustration from John six that demonstrates why the Lord's Supper should not be closed is again tied to the passage occurring during the time of the Passover festival. Darrell

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<sup>24</sup>G. Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 145.

Johnson explains that Genesis two in light of John six reminds us when God said the word "cast out of the garden" in the fall narrative; this was the result of God now protecting us from the tree of life. Johnson then expounds on how this is one of the texts that is read and explained during the Passover festival. When the crowd in John six hears Jesus speak about "bread of life" Johnson asks, could they have actually thought of it in terms of the "tree of life"? Then in John 6:37 Jesus says, "all that the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out." The way to the tree of life has now been opened for all, reserved for any who are willing to come and partake of that which has come down from heaven.

Johnson gives another example from Genesis two and three in light of John six that bears witness to open communion. Genesis 2:17 and 3:6 describe how if Adam & Eve ate of the tree of life, they would die. The phrase "eat of it and you will die" would have been in the minds of the people during the Passover. Looking at John 6:50 Jesus says, "this is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die." Johnson goes on to explain that to eat the Bread of life, which Jesus is, means to enter into the life lost at creation. This helps one to understand the hard words that come after verse 50. Jesus says that faith is more than intellectual knowledge when it comes to understanding the truth of who Jesus is. Faith is entering into an intimate relationship with Him. A relationship so intimate that the only way Jesus can help us comprehend it is to describe it by saying "eat me". Johnson rightly says that what Jesus is saying is that He wants us to share with Him in His very life. In Leviticus 17:12-14 it says that mankind is not to drink blood because life is in the blood. It is a conviction that if the blood is still present in the meat about to be eaten, then there is life within. Now then, Christ is saying to us 'eat my

flesh and drink my blood' as a way of saying 'I want to give you from my very self and I don't know any way better to say it than to say come partake of me'.<sup>25</sup>

How could anyone want to reserve that blessed participation from anyone else? It seems that there has been a shift in that this meal is now offered by the church instead of being offered by God. Though the one is interconnected with the other we lean more on the first. The people of the church have become stewards of this meal in such a way that we feel that we must protect it instead of freely giving it out by making it available to all just as we have received it. The question underlying this is how do we participate in this meal in a way that it is not diminished to a mere token, but gives reverence to its meaning while at the same time making sure everyone knows that they are welcome to partake in it?

I believe that the only way we can get to this point as the church in Eucharistic hospitality by allowing the Lord's Supper to be a missional tool is to do as Gordon Smith has stated in class. We must "err on the side of mercy and not judgment." This makes sense, especially in light of the end of John six when Jesus knew that what He was saying was not only hard to understand but that the people were really just after the food would satisfy them in the present moment. The church must be willing to say that this is the Lord's table and that all are welcome here even as they understand what partaking in the meal means. It must be made clear that by partaking in communion, one indicates that he or she believes who Christ says He is. It also signifies that he or she understands that there is now a responsibility to each other to remind each other of what Christ has done for us each time the church shares this meal together. Wainwright summarizes another way to state this when he says that until we see this meal in light of the eschaton there

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<sup>25</sup>The above statements adapted from a lecture by Darrell Johnson, *Believing into Life: Studies on the Gospel of John* (Regent College Publishing, 2006).

can be no intercommunion, but when we do see the meal in light of the eschaton there is no other way to celebrate than intercommunion.<sup>26</sup>

At the end of chapter six, after they have shared the Last Supper, Jesus says to His disciples, "Did I not choose you? And yet one of you is a devil?" Jesus came down from heaven as bread for *everyone* to partake of and yet some that partake still do not understand. Beside prayer there is not much else we, as the church, can do for them except to be faithful to offer the bread and the wine to all who have come to join in the meal. That in the remembrance and the reminder of what we are partaking in there might be such grace to that person that life will never be the same for them again. I have heard countless testimonies of people seeing or experiencing God at work in all sorts of miraculous ways. They often say how life will never be the same because of it. Yet I have not heard of any testimonies where someone has had that same experience at the celebration of the Lord's Supper. I ask why not. What better place to experience such deep and profound love than at the very table where the Savior laid His life out for His friends and said partake of me. I now have a missional prayer that I will pray until I can pray no more. My prayer is that the church will continue to have Eucharistic hospitality in such a way that everyone who is not participating in the Lord's Supper really does feel like they are missing out on life and cannot help but come, partake in the body and blood of Jesus and share in the glory that is given to us through Him.

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<sup>26</sup>G. Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 140-146.

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