

SPIRITUALLY FEEDING, MUTUALLY INDWELLING: TOWARD A
SACRAMENTAL INTERPRETATION OF JOHN 6:51c-58 FOR THE
CHURCHES OF THE STONE-CAMPBELL TRADITION

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In all of John 6, the chapter that has been called the “Grand Central Station” of John since it is a crossroads for so many of this Gospel’s distinctive themes,¹ the singularly most controversial passage has been vv. 51c-58. Having already declared himself to be the bread from heaven, the bread of life (vv. 32-38), Jesus shifts in vv. 51c-58 to identifying the bread of heaven explicitly—indeed graphically—with his *flesh* and *blood*, and asserts that only those who *eat his flesh* and *drink his blood* receive eternal life. Is Jesus directly alluding to the Eucharist here, or is he simply speaking in figurative terms of a deep and abiding spiritual communion with the bread of heaven? If he *is* alluding to the Eucharist, is he referring broadly to the faith that informs or is informed by eucharistic practice, or is he commending, in more narrowly “sacramental” terms, a material or instrumental “means of grace”? Perhaps these were not exactly the questions in the minds of those disciples who, at the time, called this a “hard saying” of Jesus (6:60). But they *are* the questions posed by puzzled interpreters in subsequent centuries, including many within the Stone-Campbell heritage.

¹ David Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1997), 7.

John 6:51c-58 in Recent NT Scholarship

Modern NT scholars are divided on these questions.² Some find a clear eucharistic connection in vv 51c-58, and are supported by a broad tradition of interpretation of John 6 extending back into the patristic period that valued the “realist” language of this text for expounding the mystery of Christ’s eucharistic presence. Others scholars are more skeptical. Rudolph Bultmann, for example, admits the passage is eucharistic but pronounces it a later redactor’s interpolation since it contradicted the larger message of John that *faith* alone is the unique vehicle of grace.³ James Dunn therefore sees Jesus’ flesh-eating and blood-drinking language simply as a pregnant metaphor for faith itself, since taken literally these verses would contradict the otherwise *anti-sacramental* tone of John.⁴

Still other interpreters admit eucharistic overtones in vv. 51c-58 but understand this as primarily a *christological* text that reiterates Christ’s incarnation (“flesh”) and sacrificial death (“blood”) as the only true sources of everlasting life.⁵ In what I find the most compelling version of this line of thinking, C. K. Barrett argues that for John, the *incarnation itself* is already the primary “sacrament” or material means of grace (cf. 1:14), which relativizes—but still affirms—a “sacramental” efficacy of the Eucharist for believers aspiring to eternal life. Jesus’ declaration about eating “the flesh of the Son of Man” (v. 53) serves at least three purposes. First, it answers his Jewish detractors in v.

² For excellent reviews of the major interpretive issues and accompanying scholarship, see Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, 17-69, 110-36; and M. J. J. Menken, “John 6:51c-58: Eucharist or Christology?” in R. Alan Culpepper, ed., *Critical Readings of John 6* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 183-5.

³ Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. B. Beasley-Murray et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 218-20.

⁴ James Dunn, “John VI—A Eucharistic Discourse?” *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970-71): 328-38.

⁵ Menken, “John 6:51c-58,” esp. 187-204.

52 who have failed to see the inferiority of the “fleshly” manna from heaven to Christ as the true “flesh” from on high (see vv.30-51, 58). Second, Jesus says that one who eats his flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life, but he also adds the phrase “And I will raise him up on the last day” (v. 54b), thus providing an important *eschatological* caveat that effectively prevents any illusion that consuming the eucharistic elements automatically bestows immortality. The Savior alone holds the ultimate key to resurrection. Third, however, Jesus is positively commending the eucharistic flesh and blood as the means of a gracious communication of life and of a “mutual indwelling” (v. 56) between the Savior and the believer.⁶

The strength of Barrett’s interpretation is his sensitivity to the dialectical character of John’s Christology, eschatology, and attitude toward the sacraments, as addressed to the dynamic life of the Johannine community in its struggles to comprehend all the dimensions or “means” of grace. Eucharistic language in John 6 is interwoven into a chapter that opens precisely with a miracle of Christ’s feeding the hungry with loaves (vv. 1-14). “The image of feeding, however,” writes Barrett, “finds a focus in the Eucharist, and John uses this, just as he uses that other focus, the miracle of the loaves, but he is careful to show that each of these is not an end in itself but points to a more significant kind of relation.”⁷

I mention one other recent scholar, who follows Barrett part-way but then takes a different tack. Paul Anderson, a Quaker NT scholar who has composed one of the most

⁶ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 82; idem, “The Flesh of the Son of Man,” in his *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 42-49; idem, “Sacraments,” *ibid.*, 84-6. The close relation of incarnation and sacramentality in John 6 is further developed by Alasdair Heron in his excellent *Table and Tradition: Toward an Ecumenical Understanding of the Eucharist* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), esp. 48-56.

⁷ Barrett, “The Flesh of the Son of Man,” 44.

prolific studies of John 6, and who we might suppose by his background to have an anti-sacramental bias, admits (with Barrett) that the incarnation is itself the primary “sacramental” reality in John. But Anderson concludes that the eucharistic language of vv. 51c-58 is only “semeiological.” In other words, John is not interested in a *ritual* sacrament at all but in the realization of believers’ corporate solidarity with one another and with Christ—a solidarity best conveyed in the imagery of table fellowship.⁸ I find Anderson’s argument wanting, since he is saying that the Eucharist for John is efficacious as a linguistic symbol but not as an actual practice embodying communion with Christ.

Interpretation of John 6:51c-58 in the Stone-Campbell Tradition

Let us turn now to the interpretation of John 6 in the context of the Stone-Campbell tradition. Historically, interpreters within our tradition have concurred with the likes of Barrett and Anderson in understanding vv. 51c-58 as primarily *christological* in orientation, but have either denied a eucharistic allusion or found only a secondary eucharistic connection. Early in our history, Robert Richardson used this text as a case study in the misinterpretation of scripture. Though ironically he was the most devout sacramentalist among the Stone-Campbell movement’s first-generation leaders, Richardson denied that John 6:51c-58 referred to the Lord’s Supper. How, he asks, could Christ have been alluding in these verses to the Eucharist before he had even instituted it at the Last Supper? Moreover, the text has been consistently misused by those who say that the Eucharist is the *sine qua non* of salvation. These verses refer exclusively to

a partaking of Christ himself, and this discourse has, consequently, no reference whatever to the ordinance called the Lord’s Supper, but to Christ alone... It exhibits Christ as the great source and support of spiritual or

⁸ Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, 112-36.

eternal life, and men, consequently ‘eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of man,’ in the true sense and meaning of the figure here employed, whenever, by faith, they lay hold on Christ and appropriate to themselves the benefits of salvation.

Eating Christ’s flesh and drinking his blood is tantamount, says Richardson, to confessing faith in Christ as Savior. He does allow, however, that even if the Lord’s Supper is not immediately in view, it does have an *analogous* relation to the present text. “The discourse, then, and the Lord’s Supper, are each to be regarded as designed to exhibit the same great spiritual truth in certain aspects, and they are, therefore, co-equal, and neither is subordinate to the other, being related only through the medium of the great truth to which each bears a separate and independent testimony.”⁹

Interestingly, however, in his collection of worship meditations entitled *Communings in the Sanctuary* (1872), Richardson appears more directly and positively to have included the Eucharist in the meaning of “eating the Lord’s flesh” in John 6, albeit not as the exclusive means of that spiritual feeding:

Yet it is not alone in the sanctuary of God that we are admitted to this privilege; nor is it alone in the divine institution of the Lord’s supper, that we eat the flesh and drink the blood of our Redeemer. It is here, indeed, that, by these sacred emblems, we can most easily realize the figure in which Christ thus represents himself as the source of spiritual life; but it is in the meditations of the heart in the night-watches; in humble submission to the divine commands; in trustful reliance upon divine promises; in every exercise of faith; in every emotion of Christian love; in every act by which we enjoy communion with Christ, that we receive him as ‘the heavenly food that gives life to the world,’ and renewing our fainting energies, are enabled to toil onward and upward to the better land.¹⁰

Another early Stone-Campbell exegete, Robert Milligan, in the chapter on the Lord’s Supper in his influential *The Scheme of Redemption* (1868) quotes the entirety of

⁹ Robert Richardson, “Misinterpretation of Scripture,” no. IV, *Millennial Harbinger* (1857): 158-61.

¹⁰ Robert Richardson, *Communings in the Sanctuary* (Lexington: Transylvania Printing & Publishing, 1872), 111-12.

John 6:53-58 only to dismiss any “direct reference” to the Eucharist. Similar to Richardson, however, he admits that it speaks generally to any and every “ordinance of God” as “a medium of nourishment to the hungry soul,” but among these, the Lord’s Supper is clearly best suited to our spiritual nourishment on the body and blood of Christ.¹¹ What Milligan seems to take back with one hand exegetically, he gives back with the other in practical appropriation.

B. W. Johnson, in his *People’s New Testament with Notes* (1886), continued the christocentric interpretation begun by his forbears, but with some new accents and disclaimers. In line with the larger message of John, and especially chapter 6, he argues that vv 51c-58 are really about consuming the living Bread, the Word, the Logos whose words give life (v. 63) to those who appropriate them through faith in his death and resurrection. Repeating the longstanding Protestant repudiation of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, Johnson points to Jesus’ caveat in v. 63, that “the spirit gives life” while “the flesh is of no avail.”¹²

Jumping ahead, we find that more recent exegetes from the Stone-Campbell tradition are more willing to link John 6:51c-58 to the Eucharist. Here I can only sample commentaries from the three streams of the tradition. James Burton Coffman, from the Churches of Christ, affirms without reservation the eucharistic connection, particularly as the “eating of flesh” and “drinking of blood” parallel Jesus’ words of institution at the Last Supper recounted in the Synoptics: “This is my body....this is my blood.” Echoing the concerns of Richardson and Milligan, Coffman concedes that the Lord’s Supper is *not*

¹¹ Robert Milligan, *An Exposition and Defense of the Scheme of Redemption, as It Is Revealed and Taught in the Holy Scriptures* (Cincinnati: R. W. Carroll, 1869), 431-2; cf. also idem, “The Lord’s Supper,” no. 1, *Millennial Harbinger* (1859): 603-4.

¹² B. W. Johnson, *John: A Commentary for the People Based on Both Versions*, The New Testament Commentary, vol. III (Des Moines: Eugene S. Smith, 1886), 109-10.

the only means of ingesting Christ, but it is an *essential* one since only those who partake of the Supper can truly be said to have consumed the Lord's flesh and blood. Coffman even quotes the Latin patristic writer Cyprian of Carthage (third century) to the same effect, and admonishes those who would reduce the feeding on Christ exclusively to faith alone.¹³

From the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, Beauford Bryant and Mark Krause likewise affirm the eucharistic adumbration in our passage, but are compelled to level a caustic criticism against sacramentalist (Roman Catholic et al.) understandings of the text. "Participation in the Lord's Supper is not an exercise in magic. The emblems of Communion are not 'salvation pills' that must be taken weekly to ward off condemnation to hell." The resultant explanation, however, is somewhat muddled. On the one hand, Bryant and Krause write, "'Feeding on Jesus' (v. 57) equals believing in Jesus," and the bread from heaven is factually the crucified flesh of Christ. On the other hand, they affirm that the feeding must at least include the Eucharist and that the routine memorialism practiced in many churches may represent an overreaction to Roman sacramentalism. "Participation in the Lord's Supper is a tangible means of fellowship with Jesus, whom we have believed upon for salvation."¹⁴

Most recently from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, in their new *The People's New Testament Commentary* (inspired by the original work of B. W. Johnson noted above), once more accept eucharistic overtones in vv. 51c-58, and in the whole of John 6, and offer a gentler critique of sacramentalist interpretations. First they remind us that in John's narrative of the Last Supper, only

¹³ James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on John* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1974), 197-9.

¹⁴ Beauford H. Bryant and Mark S. Krause, *The College Press NIV Commentary: John* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1998), 172-3.

Judas actually received bread! “It is Christ—who is present in the eucharistic service and to whom the bread and wine point—who gives life, not a magical effect of the eucharistic elements themselves.” Still, John’s insistence on participation in the Lord’s Supper may reflect a [not unfamiliar] context where Jewish or even Gentile Christians were tempted toward an individualistic faith that avoided the social and religious issues associated with ritual.¹⁵

Granted they are only a cross-section, if we look at these interpretations by Stone-Campbell scholars cumulatively, we see some consistencies amid the differences. First, virtually all the writers situate vv. 51c-58 squarely within the larger “bread of life” discourse of John 6, and so too give a *christocentric* focus to the text. Christ alone—incarnate, crucified, and resurrected—is the primal source of eternal life. Second, either a direct or indirect reference to the Eucharist is affirmed. Even for those like Richardson and Milligan who do not see an immediate connection to the Lord’s Supper, the text has clear eucharistic *implications* within the larger purview of the church. Third, the avoidance of sacramental-*ism* is an issue, even though Coffman of the Churches of Christ insists that feeding on Christ involves, absolutely, participation in the Lord’s Supper. These writers reflect a tradition that largely embraced classic Protestant polemics against any theory or theology that renders the Lord’s Supper a mechanical or magical means of grace—this despite the fact that such a view never historically posed an immediate threat to the Stone-Campbell Movement. Only with baptism did serious controversy arise concerning the efficacy of an ordinance.¹⁶ And finally, to the extent that they connect

¹⁵ M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 310-11.

¹⁶ I am thinking here especially of Alexander Campbell’s long dispute in the 1830s with Dr. John Thomas of Virginia, who created a virtual schism with his teaching that the only efficacious immersion is

feeding on Christ with eucharistic practice, these Stone-Campbell interpreters do little to explain the “feeding” itself other than offering generalities. Again, the principle of “mutual indwelling” (v. 56) between Christ and believers, though native to the text, remains largely unexplored, doubtless reflecting a commonsense Protestant suspicion of the “mystical.”

It is striking to me that interpreters from the Stone-Campbell tradition, a tradition that cherished *one* “original” meaning of any given biblical text, have nonetheless been forced to deal, wittingly or unwittingly, willingly or unwillingly, with the reality that the “original” horizon of John’s Gospel is dynamic and the Evangelist’s overall argumentation dialectical. As a number of scholars have shown, the “Johannine community” was a tradition very much in the process of self-definition, and through the lens of diachronic exegesis and redaction criticism we can see how John’s Gospel was addressing different concerns evolving over a period of time. Within this trajectory, *word and sacrament are thoroughly and dialectically interwoven*. In John 6 Jesus not only preaches his audience toward confessing him as the bread of heaven, he adumbrates the covenantal terms for embodying and enacting that confession. Furthermore, Jesus affirms the feeding on his flesh and blood as a *sacramental* means to enjoy the benefits of eternal life, but simultaneously refuses that sacramental “flesh” as the exclusive medium of immortality.¹⁷

that administered with the candidate’s conscious knowledge that the immersion is for the forgiveness of his or her sins. Those not conscious of this fact at the time of their baptism were to be reimmersed with that knowledge.

¹⁷ To call John categorically either “anti-sacramental” or “sacramentalist” is thus to miss the Gospel’s dialectical subtleties. See e.g., David Aune, “The Phenomenon of Early Christian ‘Anti-Sacramentalism,’” in David Aune, ed., *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honor of Allen P. Wickgren* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 194-214; also Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, 115-19.

The Challenge of a “Sacramental” Interpretation of John 6:51c-58

In the Stone-Campbell churches, where historically the celebration of the Lord’s Supper has focused on proclamation (word), memorial, and the response of faith to the “facts” of salvation history, more than on the internal mystery of ingesting Christ or on the mode of his presence, there is an enduring challenge, in the light of John 6:51c-58, to articulate what “sacramentality,” “eating the flesh” of the Savior, and “mutual indwelling” mean. Knowing their meaning for early Johannine Christians is crucial, but that should not stifle continuing engagement of John’s text within our own time and context. After all, John 6 has an important “afterlife” in the history of its interpretation in the church, a history that may provide our churches rich resources for addressing issues of sacramentality.

Some significant progress in the mid-twentieth century appeared in the work of William Robinson (1888-1963) of the British Churches of Christ, who had a passion to recover the sacramental dimension of the Eucharist.¹⁸ Robinson’s British predecessor, J. B. Rotherham (1828-1910), had already paved the way by pursuing deeper nuances in John 6, interpreting the consumption of Christ’s flesh and blood as figurative indeed, but also as instructive of the paschal mystery in which Christians feed on the sacrificed, now glorified Lamb (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7-8). Such is a feasting, Rotherham suggests, that collapses the heavenly and earthly:

...the feast is abundant; the life is real; the participation is festive. It is no bare memorial. The feeding is not confined to the figurative feast; but, with living partakers, it culminates there. The earthly table is in spirit-

¹⁸ See his *Ministry and Sacraments: The View of Disciples or Churches of Christ* (Birmingham, UK: Berean Press, 1937), 11, where Robinson affirms the objective “working of sacramental grace” that depends not on believers’ psychological condition but on the “fact and nature of God’s holy action, which is an eternal reality.”

touch with the heavenly altar. The Living Bread still comes direct from heaven.¹⁹

Rotherham, in a healthy way, avoided reducing the feeding on Christ merely to a platonic dialectic of spiritual and material aspects. John's dialectic is an *eschatological* one that sees "flesh" (carnal bread) in its worldly connotation giving way to the "flesh" of the new creation, the flesh transformed in the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Lord.²⁰

William Robinson for his part explored the sacramental communication of grace through the eucharistic feeding. In some of his writings on the Lord's Supper, he avoided John 6 in favor of texts from 1 Corinthians and Hebrews.²¹ But in his *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church* Robinson discusses John 6 in the context of the larger Johannine ecclesiology. In John he sees true *koinônia* in the church, the mystical substructure of its life, as the "interpenetration of personality"—an interpenetration that begins in the trinitarian relation between the Father and the Son and, through Christ, reaches out to incorporate all the faithful in their intimacy with God and with one another (cf. John 6:57; 10:14-15; 17:20-26; 1 John 2:28; 4:13).²² Such is what informs the eucharistic

¹⁹ J. B. Rotherham, *Let Us Keep the Feast* (1911), excerpted in Charles R. Gresham and Tom Lawson, eds., *The Lord's Supper: Historical Writings on Its Meaning to the Body of Christ* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1993), 22-6.

²⁰ Cf. Heron, *Table and Tradition*, 49: "In John, as in Paul, the antithesis is not between 'ideal' and 'material,' but between the world and realm of the 'flesh', the world of men living by their own power and their own standards, their own perceptions and their own light, separate from God, and the new power of life opened up in Christ which transforms the old world into a new one by the creative energy of Christ himself."

²¹ E.g., Robinson had a particular affinity for Heb. 10:19-22, with its eschatological imagery of the faithful entering the "sanctuary" (of eucharistic participation) through "blood of Jesus" and the "curtain" of his "flesh." See his *A Companion to the Communion Service* (Birmingham, UK: Berean Press, 1942), 13.

²² William Robinson, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1955), 15-18, 88-9, 94-6, 157. Similarly, cf. Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (Encyclical Letter, 17 April 2003), who cites John 6:57 ("As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me") and comments: "Jesus himself reassures us that this union, which he compares to that of the life of the Trinity, is truly realized" (online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html). And from the Reformed tradition, cf. Heron, *Table and Tradition*, 51-52, who notes the consistent theme of interconnection between the Father-Son relation and the Christ-humanity relation throughout John's Gospel.

discourse in John 6, in which the “realist” language of flesh-eating and blood-drinking conveys not only *faith that* Christ is the bread of heaven but faithful *union* with him and with fellow disciples.²³ Robinson does not specifically cite it, but clearly this is for him what the “mutual indwelling” in v. 56 is all about.

Unlike many of his Stone-Campbell forbears, Robinson did not shy away from John’s “realism.” He was certainly aware of the historic controversies over the metaphysics of Christ’s presence in the bread and wine and, wisely I think, he did not merely dismiss these as a grand waste of time, though he had no desire to revisit them. In his own work he doubtless knew of the theme of “spiritual feeding” in the Anglican tradition, and he deferred particularly to some of the great Reformed theologians, including Calvin, who declared eating Christ’s flesh to be, more than faith itself, the gracious communication of Christ in a relation of mutual indwelling.²⁴ Robinson also appropriated P. T. Forsyth’s view that feeding on Christ is not simply a representational symbol but one that intrinsically conveys the real “action” of the Savior.²⁵ Having made his peace with sacramental “mystery,” Robinson embraced the mysteriousness of the mutual indwelling actualized through the Eucharist: “It has to do with the personal relationship of love and is illustrated by the fact that when two people are in love, the

²³ *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*, 89-90.

²⁴ Robinson, *A Companion to the Communion Service*, 45-55, excerpting Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17. The principle of “mutual indwelling” from John 6:56 was a fixture in a number of the early Reformed and Anglican eucharistic liturgies, including those of Martin Bucer, John Calvin, and Thomas Cranmer. Cf. Bucer’s *Strassburg Liturgy* (1539), in Bard Thompson, ed., *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 173; and Calvin’s *Form of Church Prayers* (1542), *ibid.*, 207; also Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), *ibid.*, 258. A rich exposition of John 6:51c-58 appears intermittently in Cranmer’s great refutation of the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation, *An Answer to Stephen Gardiner* (1551), reprint ed. John Edmund Cox (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2001).

²⁵ Robinson, *A Companion to the Communion Service*, 54-5, excerpting Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*. Elsewhere Robinson preferred to speak of the “Real Action” more than the “Real Presence” of Christ in the eucharistic feeding: see *The Administration of the Lord’s Supper*, 35; “The Meaning of Anamnesis,” 23. For a fuller analysis, see Byron C. Lambert, *The Restoration of the Lord’s Supper and the Sacramental Principle* (Los Angeles: Westwood Christian Foundation, 1992), 13-26.

mutual love between them remains an abiding mystery.”²⁶ In a sense Christians must reenter the sacred narrative of the Upper Room, or of the Supper at Emmaus (Luke 24:28-32), where the spiritual feeding begins dramatically to play itself out; and in Robinson’s view the sublimity, intimacy, *and mystery* of the Upper Room or Supper at Emmaus had largely been lost in Protestant practice.²⁷

But this mystery is best understood in eschatological terms. If this is done it will be seen that we do not offer Him. He offers Himself anew to us at each Eucharist, and we, His Body, the Church offer ourselves to Him as we spiritually feed upon His sacrifice, receiving His Body and Blood.²⁸

I conclude this paper with an appeal that follows on the heels of Robinson’s campaign to rediscover the sacramental dimensions of the Lord’s Supper in the Stone-Campbell tradition. Our appropriation of John 6:51c-58 has manifested the strengths and the weaknesses of Protestant interpretation, a strength being the consistently christological/incarnational focus, a weakness being the persistent allergic reaction to sacramental realism and an unfounded fear of the mysterious dimensions of the interpenetration of divine and human life. We would do well to learn from the early church—from writers like Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nyssa,²⁹ Cyril of Alexandria,³⁰ and others, who were not so scandalized by John’s *physical* language of the transfusion of eternal life through the flesh (bread) and blood

²⁶ Robinson, *The Administration of the Lord’s Supper*, 37.

²⁷ Cf. his “The Meaning of Anamnesis,” *Shane Quarterly* 14 (1953), 23; *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*, 90; *The Administration of the Lord’s Supper*, 37-8. A similar concern has been more recently expressed by David Matson in his “Breaking the Bread, Breaking the Veil: Recognition of Jesus at Emmaus,” *Leaven* 3 (1995): 8-12.

²⁸ Robinson, “The Meaning of Anamnesis,” 23.

²⁹ For a collection of relevant primary texts, see Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 3rd ed. (Abilene: ACU Press, 1999), 103-114. I must take issue, however, with Ferguson’s portrayal of much of this language simply as anti-docetic or anti-Gnostic rhetoric. I would likewise dispute Anderson’s contention (*The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, 119-26, 133-4) that the sacramental realism of writers like Ignatius was merely a linguistic gesture in response to the pagan mystery cults.

³⁰ See Cyril’s eloquent fifth-century *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, trans. P. E. Pusey (London: Walter Smith, 1874), 408-31 (on John 6:51c-58).

(wine).

The language of John 6:51c-58, if not metaphysical, is certainly *organic*, portraying an *engrafting* into Christ through eucharistic feeding. But it is also not the language of strict sequence or cause-and-effect. “Mutual indwelling” hardly bespeaks a simple transaction confined in time and space. Truly feeding on Christ’s flesh and blood, receiving his life into our life, is a complex “event.” It comprehends the salvation-historical past, the present momentary communion of bread and wine, the lifelong drama of individual faithfulness and ecclesial solidarity, all within the eschatological perspective of anticipating the heavenly banquet when believers shall commune, not only *on* Christ, but *with* Christ face to face. Perhaps it is not too late for us to imagine, with the Fathers of the ancient church, and with the late William Robinson,³¹ that the drama of Christ’s incarnation is still unfolding in the life, worship, and sacramental rituals of the church.

³¹ Robinson, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*, esp. 117-119. See also the consensual sacramental emphasis in the commentary on the Eucharist in the widely influential *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document of the Faith and Order Commission (Paper no. 111; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), and online: <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/bem4.html>.