

Communing with Cannibals

John 6:51-63

Two cannibals were having lunch. “Your wife makes a great soup,” said one to the other. “Yes!” agreed the first. “But I’m going to miss her terribly.”

Why did the cannibal live on his own? He was fed up with other people.

What’s a cannibal with four kids? A caterer.

What did the cannibal say when he was full? “Sorry, I just can’t eat another mortal.”

Why was the cannibal expelled from school? Because he kept buttering up the teacher.

What did the cannibal’s wife give her husband when he came home late for dinner? The cold shoulder.

What happened to the cannibal lion? He had to swallow his pride.

What does a cannibal call a skateboarder? Meals on wheels.

Cannibal Boy: I’ve brought a friend home for dinner. Cannibal Mom: Put him in the fridge and we’ll have him tomorrow.

Did you hear about the missionary who gave cannibals their first taste of Christianity?

Cannibal: Mom, mom, I ate a priest and now I feel sick!

Mom: Well, you know what they say – you can't keep a good man down!

The cannibal priest told his flock to close their eyes and say grace. "For whosoever we are about to eat, may the Lord make us truly thankful."

As stupid and sacrilegious as these jokes are, most people are not aware that, at one point in time, Christianity was scandalized for promoting a deviant form of cannibalism. Serious questions about Jesus' message and intent were raised in the earliest years of Christianity, largely due to the Eucharistic rituals of the nascent church. The Roman writer, Suetonius, referred to Christians as "a class of men [sic] given to a new and mischievous superstition." Tacitus, the Roman historian, echoed this judgment with his own stern assessment of the Christian scandal:

Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius's reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilatus...But in spite of this temporary setback, this deadly superstition had broken out not only in Judea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital. ¹

Tacitus' condemnation reinforced the stereotype in Roman society of early Christians being cannibalistic, incestuous sorcerers.

This judgment of the Christian cult didn't come out of nowhere. As we know, many of Jesus' words were provocative and disturbing, easily subject to misinterpretation; some of his teachings are still hard to understand or to live down. Not only were they fodder for

¹ J. David Cassel, "Defending the Cannibals," *Christianity Today*, Jan. 1, 1998.

critics in ancient times, they were divisive among the early generations of believers as well.

Perhaps, none of them possessed the shock effect in the public square quite as much as these from John 6:

...Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

Needless to say, these words can't be accepted on face value without the hideous implications of cannibalism. Jokes aside, this isn't a practice tolerated, let alone fostered, by any developed civilization for clear and obvious reasons. It's primitive, barbaric behavior. Yet, on the surface, it appears as if Jesus was promoting this disturbing practice. Certainly, within his own Jewish tradition, the notion that one would eat another person's flesh and drink their blood was morally reprehensible—in fact (as it would be for us), it was viewed as evidence of satanic rituals and influence, not just the weird fascinations of a sadistically sick person.

One has to wonder, what was Jesus thinking? What did he anticipate the reaction would be from his audience? What would be his point? How would he expect listeners to take it other than as a horribly offensive, religiously insulting characterization of who he was and what he stood for—particularly in the context of first century Judaism? What could possibly be the reason for its place in the Christian canon?

As I've said on more than one occasion: Jesus of Nazareth spoke to provoke. Even if what we read and hear seems ghastly and repulsive to us, the fact that it remains in the Christian record means

it was very intentional and important language on Jesus' part. Otherwise, it would have been edited out or revised to make it more palatable. Clearly, the early church struggled with negative stereotypes because of it. Two thousands years later, we're challenged to make sense of it by appreciating the context, not only of Jesus and his audience, but of the Gospel writer's as well. When we do that, we are better able to grasp the intended message.

One thing to note initially is how this chapter fits into the overall story of John's Gospel. Namely, this is where the writer chose to introduce the Eucharistic imagery of the church—meaning, this was John's version of the Last Supper with the bread and wine representing Jesus' life and ministry. This might not be immediately clear to us because we usually follow Matthew, Mark, and Luke's version where the Eucharistic imagery is conveyed in the context of a meal on Maundy Thursday (foreshadowing his death, but also lifting up the shared meal as the preeminent image of the Jesus community). But in the Fourth Gospel, the Eucharistic message is not presented on the night before Jesus died.

Instead, on that night in John's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed washing the feet of his disciples in a demonstration of the supreme role of humility and service to others as the hallmark of John's Christian community. What this means is that John chose not to set the Eucharistic symbols in that setting, but to present them earlier in Jesus' life in the context of the "Feeding of the Multitude," making the inference of Jesus as the new manna from heaven and as the eternal Bread of Life. The Bread of communion, then, represents not his

“body broken for you,” but the new manna from heaven—a gift of gracious providence from God.

The implications are far-reaching. In John, these provocative words about eating his body and drinking his blood would have not been in reference to Jesus’ *death*, but instead in reference to *his life* and his role in his disciples’ lives and their ability to follow him in order to find the true meaning to life. This becomes more evident to us in the way that flesh and blood were understood in the Hebrew tradition.

As you may know, two things forbidden in the *kashrut* (or kosher) diet are the blood of an animal and its fat, or flesh, particularly around its kidneys and sexual organs. Modern epidemiologists might cite the health reasons for these prohibitions based on the risks in ancient times in eating the blood and fat of animals—the same thing true with consuming pork and other non-kosher items. However, in ancient Judaism the dietary laws were not passed along for health reasons, but sustained by religious purposes. Blood and fat were viewed ceremonially as sources of life and thus belonging to God alone. The blood and the fat were considered the essence of life of the animal—so only God—the Giver of Life—could be offered the source of life of another being (cf. Gen. 9:4; Lev. 7:26, 27, 17:14). Thus, in the religious sacrifices, the blood of the animal was poured upon the altar, while the fat was burned up and everything rose up in smoke toward the heavens. They were considered holy and given to God alone (cf. Lev. 9:24, I Kgs. 8:64, Ezk. 44:7), representative of the gift of life. To ingest blood or fat was, by implication, to strive to be like God as one who gives life. No Jew in

his or her right mind would dare presume to do this. That's one reason for why the kosher diet was established.

What does this mean? If this is John's Eucharistic message—his version of the Last Supper—how can it be understood so as not to make it offensive and crude and a sacrilege—as if it's only about communing with cannibals—a claim made about Christians from the earliest times?

Obviously, for the writer of John, this notion of eating the prohibited flesh and blood was meant metaphorically, meaning that followers spiritually ingest the *life* of Jesus and become one in spirit with Jesus—something sacred and reserved for God alone. Jesus invited his followers to “eat his flesh” and “drink his blood”—“you in me and I in you”—as a way to connote an intimacy, a devotion, and interconnectedness between the human believer and God—all being made possible through the life and spirit of Jesus—Jesus embodying the very essence and Spirit of God.

As much as the other Gospel writers followed the logic of the Apostle Paul by viewing the bread and cup in reference to Jesus' death as a redemptive atonement, the writer of John did not; he considered this sacramental act as referencing the Presence of God in the Holy Spirit, brokered by Jesus. One eats of these elements to spiritually symbolize the oneness with God through Jesus, the Christ. Thus, for John, the Eucharistic ritual of the bread and wine were reflective of believers taking into themselves the life and spirit of Jesus—a sacred act reserved for God alone.

This makes communion less about divine redemption and more about divine inspiration and presence. To commune with God even

metaphorically meant followers are given the privilege to strive to be like God—to experience what was solely God’s alone by sharing the life Spirit of God with others. We are invited to be in intimate communion with God through the One who represents God and is already intimate in Spirit with God. The body and the blood represent the gift of life from God, and by ingesting it, it serves as a sign of God’s communion with us and that we commit to being more like God in our conduct and spirit.

When viewed in this way, in many respects, John’s insights into the Eucharistic meanings of the bread and cup as symbols of life are much richer and more profound than is normally conveyed in the shared elements which refer to Jesus’ death which we, of course, derive from the other Gospels and from Paul. A simple act of ceremony at communion then serves as the essence of what it means to be a Christian—to be given the opportunity to share the same Spirit and life of Jesus—to be able to live like him, be inspired like him, act like him, and love like him in a mystical communion with each other and with God.

So, yes, spiritually and metaphorically speaking, Christians are cannibals; we symbolically ingest the life of Christ, which is reserved for God alone, and become like him in spirit. We embrace the notion that humans, in spite of our condition and conduct, have the opportunity to become like God—the One who gave us life and sustains us providentially throughout our days.

Though this seems perfectly sensible to us given two thousand years of history, imagine how hard it was to convey this message with integrity in ancient Judaism! Who could imagine such an outrageous

proposition as this? Who could grasp such a theological concept that would fulfill even the best spiritual intentions of any religion? Who would have the audacity to proclaim the central message of this faith we follow—that we can share in ingesting and sharing the Presence of the Creator and Sovereign God in our midst?

Only the One who has been the human face of God, who abides in us and among us as the bearer and bestower of God's own life and Spirit—this Jesus, the Christ, whom we follow and adore.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
16 August 2015