

I Am the Bread of Life

John 6:48-51

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I feel sad sometimes that you, who have to come to our congregation in the last five years, never got to know some of the saints who made this church great in prior years but have since, gone on to heaven. Bud Alison, Nan's husband, was one such person. As Bud was dying, he called me to his bedside and asked me a question that resurfaces in my mind from time to time. He said, "John, my bags are packed and I'm at the station, now tell me the truth. Have you been lying to me all these years or am I really about to step over into eternal life?"

As I age and read and pray and struggle with faith and the interpretation of Scripture, I pose that question to myself frequently. "In light of what I now think and believe, am I lying to the church about any important issues?" I live in the same world that you do. The central tenets of Christianity are called into question on a daily basis by some in the scientific community and others who are trained in philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, literature and a dozen other disciplines. In addition, the claims of the Scripture and the church are challenged by the media, pop culture and a diverse group of popular gurus and spiritual mentors who sort of make up their religion as they go along. But it is really not the ideas of other people, credentialed or not, that move me to rethink my own beliefs. My intellectual, rational grappling with life is what challenges my most deeply held convictions. One of those convictions that I am forced to re-evaluate from time to time is the claim that Christians have eternal life. Is it logical, in light of all we know about death, deterioration and the circle of life, to continue to think that human beings can believe something or accept something and be rewarded with everlasting life?

When I talk about resurrection, heaven, living forever with God, am I lying to you? There is ample reason to do so. Two years ago, actor/comedian Ricky Gervais made a movie entitled *The Art of Lying*. The script was about a man named Mark Bellison who lived in a world in which lying was impossible, until, for reasons never explained, Bellison learned how to lie. Since no one on earth had experience in recognizing a falsehood, regardless of what Bellison said, he was universally believed. For a while the character uses his newfound character defect for evil, but the force of the movie begins to change when Bellison's mother faces death. She tells her son that she is afraid to go into the darkness where there is nothing. In response to her deep terror, Bellison makes up a comforting fantasy. He says "Oh mom, you're not going into darkness. You're going to a beautiful place where all the people you have ever loved are well and waiting for you. You won't feel any pain there or have any sadness and you'll live in bliss forever." His mother immediately relaxes, smiles and dies at peace. The medical team at her bedside then turns to Bellison and says with hope brimming in their eyes, "That's great news. Why hasn't anyone told us this before? Where did you get this information?" In the face of such jubilant emotion, the character who has invented lying believes he has no choice but to continue promoting what he believes is actually pure fiction.

I think all ministers, including myself, ought to have to answer the question posed in that film. If we are going to preach and teach and offer as truth, the claim that Christians shall be raised from the dead and inherit eternal life, we ought to be forced to answer, "Where did you get that information?"

Joanna recently helped me form the best answer I can manage. A few nights ago I was reading Joanna a book called **Blubber** when we came across a character that believed in reincarnation. Joanna made the astute and very post modern observation that no one knew whether reincarnation was true or not. There was, she correctly reflected, no way to prove or disprove it. She went on to state that whether a person believed in reincarnation or not, was, as she put it, a personal opinion.

I thought for a moment about how to respond. Then it came to me and I said, "That may be true, Joanna, but personal opinion must be based on something and as a Christian, I have decided to base my beliefs on what Jesus says is true."

This morning, I can tell you without any hint of deception or ambiguity that I believe God grants people of faith eternal life, because Jesus said so. If Jesus was lying or if someone put words in Jesus mouth that he never said, or if Jesus was merely mistaken, then I'll go to my grave clinging to a deception. But the Spirit who bears witness to the truth inside me, as well as the testimony of millions of other believers down through the ages, as well as the nature of the life of the historical Jesus, as well as the witnesses in Scripture have all convinced me that Christ's word is worthy of my utmost confidence and faith. For although I am convinced that the words of Jesus have been edited and arranged so that the New Testament writers could best help the communities to whom the Gospels were addressed, I do not believe the writers invented the words of Jesus. They reliably recorded what Christ said and I believe Christ is worthy of my trust and faith.

If you are persuaded that Jesus is trustworthy or if you are at least open to that possibility, I offer these words from Jesus, recorded in John, chapter six as evidence for belief in eternal life. John tells us that as the Passover festival drew near, Jesus fed a multitude of people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. The people who feasted on the miracle of the loaves and fishes wanted to make Jesus their King. In fact, the following day, large numbers of them got into boats and crossed the Sea of Tiberias to ask for more bread from Jesus. Christ responded to their request for bread by saying, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

The people were confused by that answer and reminded Jesus that Moses had given their ancestors bread from heaven, holy manna, when they were lost in the wilderness. This manna was so sacred to the Jewish people that they placed of remnant of it in the holy Ark of the Covenant. Jesus corrected the people by telling them that it was not Moses who gave them the bread from heaven, but God. "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Jesus announced. To which the people shouted, "Sir, give us this bread always." Then Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life, Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

When Jesus uttered these words, he was actually putting a new spin on a ancient saying from the Jewish wisdom literature. In the book of Sirach, the author says that once we taste wisdom we will hunger for more and thirst for more. Jesus does not deny that is true about wisdom, but claims he is offering more than wisdom. A few verses later, Christ tells these listeners, "anyone who comes to me, I will never drive away. For I have come from heaven to do the will of the One who sent me. . . This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

Hebrew scholar Aileen Guilding came up with new insight on this passage a few years ago. She researched the Scriptural passages that would have been read in the synagogue during the Passover season at the time Christ lived. She discovered that at the time Jesus said these very words, all rabbis would have been reading and preaching on the third chapter of Genesis. That is where the story of Adam and Eve's sin and subsequent banishment from the Garden of Eden is told. At the end of that story we read, "Then the Lord God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now; he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.'" In response to this possibility, the Scripture says, God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden.

Guilding writes that Jesus chose this moment to offer a way back to what Adam and Eve had lost. We just read where Jesus promised that he would not drive anyone away whom the Lord brought to him. In addition, he offered to give those longing for eternal life a different kind of food, not fruit from the Tree of Life that Adam and Eve

intended to take without permission, but the food of himself, the Bread of Life, who would provide eternal life to all who received him.

Its at this point in Jesus' teaching that his concepts get a little weird. For Jesus says, "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness and they died . . . I am the living bread that came down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. . . Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." A few verses later, Jesus used even more difficult language. He said, "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 on the last day."

It was the use of this very language that caused the Romans to accuse first century Christians of cannibalism. John says these concepts of eating flesh and drinking blood were so repugnant to the Jews, that many followers walked away from Jesus the day he said these very words.

After centuries of reflection and analysis, many Christian communities have come to believe these words refer to Communion or as Baptists often call it The Lord's Supper. Certainly in Matthew's rendition of the Last Supper, he quotes Jesus as saying as he passed the bread, "this is my body" and as Jesus passed the cup, "this is my blood." As a result of this interpretation, many Christian traditions teach that we receive and secure eternal life by faithfully taking communion. Some assemblies go as far as to say that if a believer fails to receive communion on a regular basis, they cease to take in the flesh and blood of Jesus and therefore loose the opportunity to experience eternal life. In much of Christian history, folks who were found guilty of certain sins or heretical beliefs were denied communion and thereby, from the perspective of church authorities, consigned to death and hell.

The Baptist tradition interprets Christ words differently. We have always had an aversion to teaching that a person can do any physical activity and secure eternal life. That is why we refrain from teaching that baptism, even adult baptism, even baptism by immersion, provides anyone eternal life. Baptism, without genuine repentance and faith, just gets a person wet. There is no saving power in water, even so called holy water, even the water of the baptistry.

By the same token, we cannot accept that by eating literal bread and drinking real wine, or taking in wafers and grape juice, one can receive eternal life. Our Baptist ancestors were clear in their conviction that bread and wine, no matter who has blessed it, no matter where it is stored, and no matter what words have been said over it are powerless to convey eternal life.

So how did they interpret this command from Jesus to eat his flesh and drink his blood? They heard the words "flesh and blood" in the way we use them most often today as referring to Jesus' life. Our tradition's understanding is that Jesus was calling on us to open our hearts and souls to the very life of Christ and take that life into our own. In practical terms it means to pray a sincere prayer of invitation, asking Christ's Spirit to enter our own bodies and souls and change us into Christ's likeness. We believe that when we spiritually consume Christ's life through a prayer of genuine faith, we form an unshakable bond with Jesus and it is that spiritual bond that provides us with eternal life. For in fact, it is Christ's life that raises our own life from the dead. Jesus said, if you have not eaten the Bread of Life, my flesh, you do not have my life in you and you will die and forego the blessing of eternal life. But if you have invited my life into your own, when your body gives out, my spirit will bring your spirit alive forevermore with our God in our heavenly home.

Communion for Baptists then, is a meaningful act of worship in which we celebrate Christ's life in us, with us and through us. As we eat and drink the bread and cup, we remind ourselves that are we are no longer mere children of dust, but that we have the very life of Christ inside us that is transforming us and will one day take us to heaven.

I base all I have told you today on the sure word of Jesus Christ. I'm not lying to you and by God's grace, I never will. Have you taken in the Bread of Life? Have you received the life of Christ? Jesus is with us today, waiting on your invitation. In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says, "Listen, I'm standing at the door of your heart and knocking. If you hear my voice and invite me in, I will come into your life and have communion with you forevermore." What's keeping you from issuing that invitation to Jesus? Why not do it right now and receive the eternal life of Christ today?