

## Integration

There are many ways that one can argue that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is perfectly reasonable. There are many ways that you can find universally acceptable truths in Jesus' teachings and in his actions. There is plenty of material to construct a sort of Christian/Buddhist/Muslim/Jewish/Hindu/Taoist worldview where all the truths of those religions get put in the blender and produce a generally pleasing approach to God. Then there is Jesus saying that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood; even the disciples are like, "whoa, hold on just a minute there chief." And no, it's not because they didn't understand metaphor and thought that he was trying to endorse cannibalism, it was because the weight of what he was saying was too much for them to take. How and why these words are heavy enough to make many of his followers just up and leave requires us to understand quite a bit about the ancient world and the people in it. Understand that this is a loaded discussion that involves lots of ongoing debates that we have sort of lost touch with, because after 2000 years of speaking about the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ this doesn't quite seem as shocking to us as it did to them.

So what was he actually saying here? First off, it is definitely a metaphor, but don't try and take the edge off of it. He is being deliberately provocative towards the people who are already in dispute specifically about what he said about being the bread of life. They get that it's a metaphor, but it's a challenging one, because he seems to be indicating that there is a real physical component to what is going on, and that is troublesome to a lot of people, even now. One way to avoid real connection with God is to make it all about "spiritual" things, to deny the flesh, to try and sublimate our nature to something that we call holy or pure. The dualism that was very much ingrained in Greek thought and that always seems to rear its head in various forms of Gnosticism is that the "Flesh" is bad and the "spirit" is good, or at least has the potential to transcend the imperfections of the world.

Greek actually has two words that can be used to convey the physical body. The first is *Sarx*, which is the most common and basic word for the meat and bone that makes up our bodies. The second is *Soma*, more than just flesh but still related to our physical body rather than our Spirit. In the world of Greek philosophy *Sarx* was the crude matter of our bodies, sort of just a container for the *Pneuma*, the Spirit. This Greek dualism was something that was largely adopted by the intellectual rabbis of Jesus' time, even though the Scriptural traditions indicated that we were holistic beings and that flesh was not necessarily evil, even if it was corruptible. Jewish tradition honored the flesh, from Sabbath keeping to dietary restrictions to circumcision, the chosen people were to be different in the flesh, not just the spirit. But Greek thinking was hard to avoid in the ancient world, and so by the time Jesus shows up there were people who certainly held, despite their Judaism, a decidedly Hellenistic attitude towards "the flesh." Thus many of them would have chosen to use the word *Soma* here rather than *Sarx*, just to get around that tension. The word is intentional, especially when you read it in John's account, because remember, at the very outset, he said, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." John is relaying, among other things that something rather controversial is happening, flesh and spirit are not being separated and set at odds, they are being redeemed and reconciled together.

That's why people were arguing about this, that's why the disciples were having such a hard time.

Remember what Jesus is trying to do in the biggest sense of the word, he is trying to heal an estranged relationship between God and humanity. Like many people in such broken relationships we have come up with all sorts of explanations for how it went wrong. Our most common defense is to simply blame "the flesh," and exalt the spirit. It's easy to do because the flesh is so obviously corruptible and the

spirit, as far as we can tell, is much more resilient. The spirit can even seem immortal to our understanding. Jesus insistence that the two things are actually both rather important was scandalous to people who had been rather persistently relying on the transcendence of the spirit to help them deal with the difficult circumstances that basically dominated their physical existence.

Jesus himself even seems to go back and forth on this point, at some point “the flesh” is really nothing more than what the Greeks and Gnostics like to assume: crude matter, without spirit there is no life, this much is true in OT, NT and pretty much anywhere. The existence of consciousness and what we unscientifically call a soul is still a great mystery, even with all we know about how the *Sarx* actually works. What Jesus is trying to do here is get people to see that the “flesh” is much more than just a Tupperware for the soul, the two things are connected and intimately so. Our need to separate things out limits our understanding and ultimately our participation in the divine communion of the Trinity. Understanding the relationship of body, mind and spirit is like a baby step towards being able to enter into communion with God. Jesus offers himself as an example of how it looks and what is at stake, he presents an example of an actual integrated human being, able to tune in to God’s will and respond in true relationship to God.

In as much as we can access that example, we are brought nearer to a real and true connection with our creator and thus the how and why of who we are. All things considered, it is easier just to separate things out into this and that and say one is good and the other is bad, that’s why dualism of all sorts remains inevitably popular. It is also the root of all kinds of sin, because it denies the unity of the creation made in the image of a Triune God. God did not create the physical world to be just some sort of proving ground for the soul, or worse a torture chamber. God created things because they were good and pleasing and holy, including in the flesh. Our refusal to honor any part of that creation, be it physical or metaphysical, is a rejection of the Kingdom of heaven.

Psalm 34 says that “the Lord is near to the broken hearted and saves the crushed in spirit,” and that’s a pretty common theme about God: that he loves the broken as well as the strong. God’s love is higher than our love, we love things that are admirable and strong, God loves things that are weak and cracked as well. If Jesus had just said, “You must be one in Spirit with me,” no one would have batted an eye. That sounds like every run of the mill spiritual guru you will ever meet, but he says, “you must eat my flesh and drink my blood,” which means we have to recognize that all of us is holy, not just our spirit. Jesus shows us by his death and resurrection that our flesh can transcend along with our Spirit, because all of us is made in the image of God.