

Mysterious Recommendations to Gentile Christians

Peter Rüst, CH-3148 Lanzenhäusern, Switzerland;¹ <paraske@aneste.ch>

1. The council in Jerusalem

The christian Church² was formed as a first assembly in Jerusalem seven weeks after the resurrection of Jesus, on Pentecost, when about three thousand Jews came to faith in Christ – many of them from the diaspora in the surrounding countries.³ Their open witness for Jesus the Christ soon brought a violent persecution by the Jewish establishment upon them, so that many of them dispersed – and there proclaimed the gospel.⁴ In Syrian Antioch, about 500 km north of Jerusalem, they preached to the Greek Gentiles, as well, and a large Gentile christian church formed.⁵

But some Pharisees from Jerusalem who had become believers came down to Antioch and demanded that one should have the believing Gentiles circumcised and request them to keep the law of Moses. This troubled the Antioch church to such an extent that they sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to talk the matter over with the Jerusalem church, which they did at the so-called Jerusalem Council.⁶ There they told the Jewish christians how many Gentiles had come to believe in Jesus. Paul emphasized that God himself had given them the Holy Spirit. So one must not lay on them an unnecessary burden. James, the oldest of Jesus' four brothers,⁷ who chaired the meeting, summarized (Acts 15:19-20):⁸

¹⁹ ... Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,
²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.

James justified his opinion by the fact that the Gentiles, as well, could know the law of Moses, "for from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues".⁹ One could therefore expect the Gentile christians to abstain from these few things – out of love for their Jewish brothers for whom these commandments still were very important. But all were agreed that one must not impose on them circumcision and the rest of the law of Moses. So they wrote this to the christians in Antioch.

2. What is the importance of this mysterious list of exceptions?

Independently of the law of Moses, it seems to be clear that christians must abstain from idolatry and fornication (sexual immorality¹⁰). But what's the import of abstention from blood and things strangled (non-kosher meat, still containing blood) in this context? Yes, Gentile christians should be considerate towards the sensitivities of Jewish christians. But how should this explain the other two exceptions, idols and fornication?

Why are idols and fornication mentioned here at all? Or, alternatively, why is the list of sins not much longer, like, e.g., in the severe warning of Galatians 5:19-21?

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy,

¹ Translation of a message given at Flüehli, 3150-Schwarzenburg (Switzerland) on 2 May 2009, somewhat extended. I thank Hans Zahnd for very helpful discussions.

² I capitalize "Church" when the universal Church of all who are "in Christ" is meant, but "church" indicates a local assembly of christians. In both senses, the Greek uses *ékklésía* ("the called-out one", or "assembly").

³ Acts 2.

⁴ Acts 3-8.

⁵ Acts 11, 19-26.

⁶ "Council" may suggest an official authority for the whole Church. But there certainly was no question of the apostles being entitled to dictate to all local churches what they had to do (cf. John 21:21-22). In fact it was just a meeting of some apostles and the leading elders of the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch, convened in order to find a solution for the misguided intervention of some christian Pharisees from Jerusalem in the mainly Gentile church of Antioch. Accordingly, just as the church in Jerusalem, the meeting was not chaired by an apostle (in particular, not by Peter).

⁷ Matthew 13:55.

⁸ All bible quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV, 2007 update).

⁹ Acts 15:21.

¹⁰ The ESV always translates the Greek *porneia* by "sexual immorality", rather than "fornication".

drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Idols and fornication are included here, among many other things. But unmistakably, the four points of the apostles' recommendations don't represent such a list of sins. In addition, Paul tells the Christians that they may eat everything sold in the meat market, without asking whether it had been offered in sacrifice to idols (1 Corinthians 10:25-30):¹¹

²⁵ Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ²⁶ For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." ²⁷ If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ²⁸ But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience – ²⁹ I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? ³⁰ If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

Thus, understood in this way, abstention from "things polluted by idols" belongs into the same category as abstention from blood and strangled things: it refers to consideration of Jewish Christians, not to something prohibited under the new covenant.

3. Does "fornication" here refer to mixed marriages?

How about "fornication"? Is it feasible that in this context "fornication", as well, has a restricted meaning of something expressly forbidden to Israel, but no longer binding upon Christians?

James' recommendation contains the sequence (1) idols, (2) sexual immorality, (3) things strangled, (4) blood. But the letter which the Jewish-Christian apostles and elders then wrote to the Gentile Christians and the verbal communication of the messengers Paul and Barnabas differed slightly (Acts 15:28-29):

²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality...

The formulation definitely adopted thus has a different order: (1) idols, (2) blood, (3) things strangled, (4) sexual immorality. And later, James confirmed this sequence.¹² Should then "sexual immorality" even have the least weight? Of course, it is also possible that the sequence in itself is of no particular importance.

A commentary explains the Greek word translated "sexual immorality" as follows:¹³

porneia: *fornication* (= illegitimate intercourse of all kinds), *prostitution*; *porneia* includes *entering into a forbidden* (by the law of Moses) *marriage* (and this might have been particularly relevant in this situation); but a restriction to this (as is often assumed), in the sense of a technical term (without corresponding closer specification), is presently not really substantiated.

Mixed marriages were absolutely forbidden to the Israelites because God wanted to keep them from being seduced into idolatry. After Israel had returned from the Babylonian exile, entering into a mixed marriage was considered to be such a serious offense that all those who had married foreign women had to send them away, together with their children, and all Israel repented, in order to be in God's will again.¹⁴

But it is obvious that in the new covenant such mixed marriages between Jews and Gentiles are fully acceptable if both partners are believers in Christ.¹⁵ Could therefore "fornication" in the apostles' recommendation mean mixed marriages? This would solve the problem of the list of exceptions. However, such a solution is rather unlikely to be true.

¹¹ In a quoted text, words enclosed in quotation marks ("") represent a quotation from the Old Testament (except, of course, when the context indicates otherwise).

¹² Acts 21:25.

¹³ W. Haubeck, H. von Siebenthal (1997), "Neuer sprachlicher Schlüssel zum griechischen Neuen Testament: Matthäus bis Apostelgeschichte" (Brunnen-Verlag, Giessen, ISBN 3-7655-9391-5), 752 (my translation).

¹⁴ Ezra chapters 9-10.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:39.

4. "Fornication" is adultery, prostitution, or blasphemy of God in all other contexts

It is at most in these three places in Acts¹⁶ that the Greek word *porneia* might possibly mean mixed marriages. In all other places in the New Testament (21 times¹⁷), it unmistakably refers to either prostitution, or adultery, or idolatry (designated as spiritual "adultery", i.e. apostasy from God). Similarly, the Septuagint, the old Greek translation of the Old Testament,¹⁸ uses *porneia* always (37 times) for either prostitution or idolatry.

That fornication has been placed as the last element in the definitive list doesn't automatically imply that it was considered to be the least important one. Quite generally in the Old Testament, God's revelation proceeded from simple allusions to more precise and more extended descriptions of the covenant which he wanted to establish with humans on the basis of the substitutionary sacrifice of his Son. It also moved from externally visible things to more and more invisible ones, and Jesus repeatedly pointed out the fact that what is essential is not what is visible from the outside, but what is inside the human heart.

Time and again, God uses marriage and sexual "becoming one" of husband and wife as a symbol for his own relationship with his people, and consequently adultery and prostitution as a sign and symbol of idolatry, which corresponds to God's people forsaking him.

Now, the apostles' and elders' list moves from idolatry, visible from outside, to blood, serving as a symbol of life, then to strangled things, where not even the blood is visible, and finally to fornication, which first happens in the heart,¹⁹ indicating a rejection of God, which initially is completely invisible. Might not the last place in the list indicate the most important element, with "fornication" pointing to an innermost attitude of the heart?

5. "Fornication", a deadly danger for christians

Paul shows why, for christians, fornication would not be just one of many possible sins, but one having especially grave consequences (1 Corinthians 6:12-20):

¹² "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything. ¹³ "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food" – and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴ And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." ¹⁷ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. ¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Paul explicitly addresses this warning to christians, emphasizing, by way of introduction, that basically "all things are lawful" for them.²⁰ But it is their hearts' attitude towards the Lord which is essential, being decisive for everything else. Jesus had already pointed out the same reality, i.e. that there is one particularly dangerous, even life-threatening sin (Mark 3:28-30):

²⁸ "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" – ³⁰ for they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

¹⁶ Acts 15:20; 15:29; 21:25.

¹⁷ This count doesn't include Romans 1:29, where some important manuscripts have *poneria* (evil) instead of *porneia* (fornication).

¹⁸ Dating from the 3rd to 1st centuries BC.

¹⁹ Matthew 5:28.

²⁰ Some think that Paul is here quoting a popular libertine slogan which he himself counters (cf. B. Winter, in: D.A. Carson, R.T. France, J.A. Motyer, G.J. Wenham, eds., "New Bible Commentary", Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1994, p.1170), while others see in it the whole philosophy of the christian attitude towards earthly things (cf. W.C.G. Proctor, in: F. Davidson, A.M. Stibbs, E.F. Kevan, eds., "New Bible Commentary", Inter-Varsity Fellowship, London, England, 1963, p.978).

Jesus is here addressing unbelievers, because the christian liberty is not available before the Holy Spirit resides in the hearts of the born-again – i.e. after the foundation of the Church at Pentecost.

Why is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit unforgivable, unlike all other sins? The prerequisite for forgiveness is the heart's bowing down before God in faith, and this is exactly what one denies oneself by blaspheming the Holy Spirit, i.e. a person of the triune God. All who consciously and explicitly refuse to receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord are hardening their hearts against the prodding of the Holy Spirit who always points to Jesus the Christ.²¹ So they progressively become less able to return to God, possibly until it is too late.

Therefore, adultery or prostitution is so dangerous for christians, because with this they, as well, would risk blaspheming their covenant with God, by turning away to a sexual idolatry in their hearts.

God compares his Old Testament covenant with Israel with marriage between husband and wife, and every violation of this covenant by means of idolatry is therefore called "fornication". In the New Testament, everything is internalized, and adultery begins with a look with a lustful intent at a woman who is not one's wife. With adultery or prostitution, a christian would value his own sexuality or selfishness higher than, and therefore oppose it to, his spiritually being joined to the Lord ("one spirit with him"²²). Thus he would deny, violate, break his covenant with the Lord, which would be analogous to Old Testament idolatry.

6. Do christians have to abstain from blood?

As idolatry²³ and fornication are unacceptable for christians, some believe that this also applies to eating blood. By way of justifying this opinion, they turn to Noah, because God commanded him and his sons not to eat blood (Genesis 9:4):

But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.

Mistakenly taking Noah as the progenitor of all humans living after the flood (and today!), they consider this prohibition to be binding upon all humans, Gentiles as well as Jews.

But was it really a food order which God gave Noah? Later, God gave Moses the same commandment not to eat blood. God again explained it in a similar way, but with more details (Leviticus 17:11-12):²⁴

¹¹ For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. ¹² Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.

Thus, it applied to Israel as well as any foreigners living among them, but not to other nations. The focus clearly is on the Old Testament sacrifices, all of which pointed to the future substitutionary sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross. Of course, the blood of Jesus is of central symbolic importance for all christians. But with the apostles' and elders' recommendations to the Gentile christians, the question was no longer whether the Israelites who were under the law of Moses might eat blood, but whether God wants to place this prohibition on the shoulders of christians, after the definitive atoning sacrifice of Jesus had already been performed and completed and, therefore, the Old Testament offerings were put away.²⁵ God had expressly commanded Noah, and later the Israelites, not to eat blood, but in the new covenant, the situation *after* Pentecost has to be taken into consideration.

7. Noah's significance misunderstood by young earth creationism

If the commandment not to eat blood given to Noah should be valid for all humans, it seems strange that it was given to Noah, rather than to Adam – or to Abel who sacrificed at least one of his lambs.²⁶ Some believe to be able to explain this by claiming that before Noah, only "green plants" were eaten, but no

²¹ John 14:26; 15:26.

²² 1 Corinthians 6:17.

²³ Of course, Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 10:25-30, that there was nothing wrong with just eating meat possibly offered to idols, as "the earth is the Lord's".

²⁴ The Hebrew word *nephesh* may be translated either "life" or "soul" or "person"; the same applies to the Greek word *psyche*.

²⁵ Hebrews 7:18.

²⁶ Did Abel, being a shepherd, never eat a lamb?

meat. It has been shown that this arbitrary supposition of young earth creationists is unsupportable, both scientifically and biblically.²⁷ Meat had always been eaten, and Noah wasn't the founding father of all of today's humanity – just as Adam wasn't, by the way.²⁸ It is indeed possible to accept the full reliability of the biblical text without falling into the young earth creationist trap of rejecting the agreed-upon scientific findings.²⁹

That the commandment not to eat blood was given to Noah, a long time before Moses, does not automatically make it of farther reaching importance than the law specifically given to Israel. A similar case can be seen in the importance God attributed to circumcision, which he first gave to Abraham, as a sign of his covenant. Just as the commandment not to eat blood was much older than the law of Moses, so was circumcision.

God's progressive revelation and history of salvation does not proceed from what is most important back to less important things, but on the contrary, he reveals the simplest realities early and the more comprehensive ones progressively later. But always, the attitude of one's innermost heart to God is what is decisive, never visible external acts, which, after all, are but a consequence of decisions taken by the human attitude and will, which is what counts in God's sight.

Paul calls Abraham the father of all believers, both those of Israel and those from other nations who are not descended from Abraham (Romans 4:11-12):

¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

The apostles agreed that Gentile Christians did not have to be circumcised. Abraham was called a spiritual father for uncircumcised Gentile Christians, as well, despite the great importance which circumcision had for him, because what mattered was his faith. Why then should the commandment not to eat blood given to Noah be more important for Gentile Christians than circumcision, which for Israel was central and indispensable?

8. Sacrifices and food statutes of the old covenant

Under the law of Moses, food statutes were important, but always only in view of their spiritual significance. Like all sacrificial rituals, they were instituted for the purpose of teaching the people of Israel to take God seriously, obey him, honor him, and love him from all of their hearts. In this way, Israel should learn not to follow, like the other nations, a religion concocted by sinful humans according to their own self-centered ideas, and actually inspired by the evil one, but that they needed a salvation and purification from their sins. And all this was to be a preliminary leading towards the new covenant, in which people from all nations can know and experience this salvation.

But even these central sacrifices were never made absolute by God. It always was primarily a question of people's heart relationship towards God. When king Saul disobeyed God's commandment and tried to justify himself with having planned to offer sacrifices, Samuel responded (1 Samuel 15:22):³⁰

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

Later, the misuse of the sacrificial system by the Israelites became even more callous (Isaiah 1:11):

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

²⁷ Cf., e.g., P. Rüst (2008), "Plants Only for Animals? A Young Earth Creationist Argument Contradicted by the Bible", <http://www.aneste.ch/files/plantsforanimals.pdf>

²⁸ P. Rüst (2007), "Early Humans, Adam, and Inspiration", *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, **59**, 182-193; <http://www.aneste.ch/files/earlyhumad.pdf>

²⁹ P. Rüst, "Creation and Evolution", <http://www.aneste.ch>.

³⁰ The word "LORD", written in all capitals in Old Testament texts, represents the Hebrew *JHWH*, Jahweh, the specific name of the covenant God of Israel.

In order to understand the real significance of the Old Testament sacrifices and food statutes, we have to turn to the New Testament. The Old Testament food statutes always had to do with sacrifices. When these sacrifices were abolished later, because Jesus had fulfilled the definitive substitutionary sacrifice once for all, the food statutes, as well, were outdated.

9. No binding food ordinances in the new covenant

The Pharisees reproached Jesus for tolerating his disciples eating with unwashed hands.³¹ Jesus replied (Mark 7:6-8):³²

⁶ ... Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." ⁸ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.

He then told the people a parable about being defiled, or not acceptable to God (Mark 7:15):

There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.

And to his disciples he explained the meaning of this statement (Mark 7:18-23):

¹⁸ ... "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Mark emphasizes that thus Jesus declared all foods clean – in fact Jesus did it absolutely, leaving no possible exceptions. It is assumed that Mark received the information for his gospel from Peter. And Peter had personally learned that God declared all foods clean when he was a guest of the tanner Simon in Joppa (Acts 10:11-15):

¹¹ ... and [*he*] saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common."

Peter had been genuinely anxious to keep God's food ordinances given in the law of Moses. But God had just moved his salvation history beyond the old covenant. And now, when the messengers sent by the Roman centurion Cornelius were approaching Joppa, Peter had to learn that God's plan of salvation includes the Gentiles as well as the Jews. There is no difference, as both Jews and Gentiles are "unclean", all in need of the same salvation through Christ making them "clean".

All foods are clean. Paul told the Corinthians that they might eat everything that is sold in the meat market.³³ In a pagan meat market certainly no kosher meat was sold, but only meat containing blood. And to be sure, even kosher meat would still contain some blood.

Paul recognized that the Old Testament food statutes were outdated, but that love might restrict a christian's liberty under certain circumstances (Romans 14:14-15):

¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

Thus it is one's loving attitude which matters. Abstaining from a food may be indicated by respecting a weaker brother – and this corresponds to the recommendation James and the Jerusalem church gave to the Gentile christians not to eat blood when this would grieve Jewish christians. But this must never be extended into a prohibition binding in all circumstances.

³¹ Mark 7:2-5.

³² Referring to Isaiah 29:13.

³³ 1 Corinthians 10:25-30.

Thus the basic point is not whether blood may be eaten, but that the blood is a symbol for the life given by God, and for the salvation of humans he planned, and that therefore the blood had to be respected in one's spiritual attitude. An external food law does not suit the new covenant.

10. The new covenant requires a new law

The new covenant brings a new situation. We are told explicitly that when our Lord was made high priest, the Old Testament commandment was abolished and the law was changed with the new priesthood, as it could bring nothing to the perfection intended by God (Hebrews 7:11-19):³⁴

¹¹ Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? ¹² For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. ¹³ For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. ¹⁵ This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." ¹⁸ For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

If this repeal of the commandment applied even for the entire law of Moses, how much more so for an external food statute which was but a small part of this law!

Certainly, love for God and love for one's neighbor are the fundamental attitude proper for a Christian in all situations of life. God is love, and this character should be a mark of all of God's children. Love for God and love for weaker brothers certainly characterized the recommendation of the Jerusalem meeting, including each of the four exceptions or requirements. But of course this does not imply that these recommendations as a whole should be literal commandments for all Christians in all situations of life.

11. Eat "my flesh / body"... drink "my blood" – symbols for a new spiritual reality

Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice on the cross fundamentally changes and fulfills the symbolism of eating meat ("flesh") and blood. Jesus spoke to the Jews who, after the feeding of the five thousand, grumbled about him because he had called himself "the bread that came down from heaven"³⁵ (John 6:53-58):

⁵³ ... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.

In the Sinai desert, the Israelites ate manna and quails, which had "come down from heaven". But Jesus is the real bread that came down from heaven. He emphasized that eating his flesh and drinking his blood must not be understood materially, but represent a symbol for a spiritual reality (John 6:63):

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

Spiritually speaking, the unbelieving Jews had to eat his flesh and drink his blood, i.e., they had to personally accept by faith his coming death on the cross as a propitiation for their own sins.

Then, *after* Jesus had offered himself as the substitutionary sacrifice on the cross, and after he had been raised from the dead in divine confirmation of his redemptory work finished once for all, the Holy Spirit on

³⁴ P. Rüst (2007), "Jesus and Melchizedek", <http://www.aneste.ch/files/melchizedek.pdf>

³⁵ John 6:41.

Pentecost formed the Church, which is Christ's "body". Since that time, we celebrate the Lord's supper in remembrance of this finished redemption and for its proclamation. Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 11:23-26):

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Since it was *before* his death that Jesus provided for this celebration of remembrance, his "this is my body... this is my blood"³⁶ is meant as symbolically as "my flesh... my blood" in his debate with the unbelieving Jews. Eating the bread in the Lord's supper symbolizes being one with Jesus in his "body" which is the Church, and drinking from the cup signifies personal purification through Jesus' shed blood.

Thus, two aspects of the same spiritual reality are indicated by similar symbols, first, for unbelievers, eating Jesus' "flesh and blood" as a symbol for the possibility of their future conversion and redemption, then, for believers, eating Jesus' "body and blood" as a symbol for the redemption completed for them.

"Flesh" (Greek *sarx*) identifies the *low estate* of present human nature, "body" (Greek *soma*) the created *dignity* of the bodily dimension, which is also going to partake in the eternal glory of resurrection life. Before Christ's death on the cross, the emphasis is on his real human lowliness, coming down into the earthly lowness,³⁷ taking on all human weakness in his "flesh",³⁸ but without sin. After his death, the emphasis is on the fact that since God created humans as a unity of "body", soul, and spirit, all of these dimensions are basically good, and all of them are destined to partake in the resurrection, first in Christ, the risen Lord, and later in all believers in him.

³⁶ Matthew 26:26-28.

³⁷ Ephesians 4:9.

³⁸ Cf. he "made himself nothing" (Philippians 2:7), Greek *ekénôsen*, from which the theological term "kenosis" was derived.