

The Words of Eternal Life

by Dr. Jason Van Vliet

*Simon Peter answered him,
“Lord, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life.
John 6:68*

Of course, Peter’s question is a rhetorical question. The point that he is making is simply this: there is *nowhere* else we would go, and there is no *one* else to whom we would turn because you, O Master, are the one who has the words of eternal life! Why go anywhere else?

O Lord, you have the words of eternal life. For at least a couple of reasons this is a vitally important confession, also for us.

First, it’s important because this present life is fleeting, frail, and filled with brokenness and misery. But these are powerful *words* that promise a different kind of life—a life that is forever, secure, and filled with majesty.

Second, these words are crucial because they come in the middle of a very dramatic moment in the work of our Saviour. The day before he had performed an awe-inspiring miracle when he fed a crowd of 5000 with as much bread and fish as their hearts (and their stomachs) desired. Then, the next day, the crowds came around to the other side of the lake looking for some more free bread and fish.

Precisely on this occasion Christ began teaching them about “the food that endures to eternal life” (v. 27). But even some of his disciples found this particular teaching to be one of his most difficult to understand and accept. They said, “This is a hard saying. Who can accept it?” (v. 60). In fact, after this, some from his larger circle of disciples stopped following him.

What was so difficult about his teaching? The hardest statement to accept was probably when Jesus said, “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” (v. 52). How could the Messiah be promoting something like this? Eating *flesh* and drinking *blood*? It sounds gruesome. And, worse than that, it seems to contradict God’s own, holy Word (Lev. 17:10).

Still, Jesus Christ had indicated, more than once, how this should be understood. The key is *faith*. In the verses 29, 35, 40, 47, and 64 Jesus strongly emphasizes the necessity of faith. This is not a natural, physical consumption of flesh and blood, using mouth and teeth. Instead, it is a *spiritual* eating, by faith, which is “the hand and mouth of the soul,” as we confess in Article 35 of the Belgic Confession.

But there is more. In addition to eating and drinking the crucified flesh and blood of Christ *by faith*, two additional things are central. First, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is essential because as the Lamb of God himself says, “It is *the Spirit* who gives life; the flesh is no help at all” (v.63) It is *through the Holy Spirit* that we are united more and more to the sacred, live-giving body of Christ (Lord’s Day 28).

Second, the Holy Spirit feeds us the Bread of Life through the *spoken*, that is, also the *preached* word. Here we come back full circle to this all-important statement of Simon Peter: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the *words* of eternal life.” Interestingly, the term used here for *word* is *rhēma*, not *logos*. The gospel of John is well-known for its Logos-theme. Think of the first verse of this gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Or a little later in verse 14 of chapter 1: “the Word became flesh.” Each time John uses that special word *Logos*. But

here in John 6:68, and also back in verse 63, he uses the other word for word: *rhēma*. This emphasizes the *spoken* Word.

You see, in the beginning God *spoke*, and life began. God *spoke*, and the bare, brown earth was covered with all kinds of verdant plant life: fields of oats, oak trees, and colourful orchids. God *spoke* again, and the seas were filled with fascinating, living things: whales, shrimp, and manta rays. God *spoke* again, and the skies were replete with spectacular flying creatures: owls, eagles, and hummingbirds. God *spoke* yet again, and the green-covered land was again covered, this time with an innumerable variety of animals: sleek horses, regal lions, and cute koala bears. And God spoke still one more time, and the earth had two living, breathing human beings, Adam and Eve, the pinnacle of his creative work. Every time God repeated the same pattern: he *spoke* his word, and life—new life, full life, beautiful life—appeared!

Simon Peter realizes *Christ* has the word, not just of life but of *eternal* life. In other words, this *Logos* has the *rhēma* that gives that life that never ends. So when the Holy Spirit speaks through these powerful words, new, beautiful, forever life appears.

Because of the fall into sin there is a lot of barren wilderness in this world. As we sing in Psalm 63, it can really be a “dry and weary place” on this side of eternal glory. But through the ministry of the gospel, we taste eternal life already today.

Ultimately these words of eternal life belong to Christ. He *has* them because he *is* the Bread of life. But he calls weak and broken vessels, mere and mortal men, to speak His words of eternal life. And make no mistake about it: new life does appear.

A young sister in Christ may be in deep despair, having little or no purpose or passion in life. But then she hears the spoken, preached word, and the Spirit of Christ works with the preaching of the gospel in her heart and life. The beginnings of eternal life begin to flicker again in her soul. And it’s a beautiful thing to behold.

An elderly brother in the congregation suddenly becomes afraid of death. But once again he hears the preaching of the gospel, and the peace that transcends all understanding fill his heart and mind. The hope of eternal life takes root and flourishes where only days before the weeds of death’s terror were starting to spread. And it’s a blessed thing to see.

A family never knew the Lord at all. They were just living for the moment and, truth be told, living in misery. But the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the gospel, kindles faith in their hearts. New life springs into existence. They savour the glorious flavor of eternal life for the very first time. And it’s more exhilarating to observe that regeneration than it is to tour an entire greenhouse full of orchids.

Eternal life from the Bread of Life. Given by His Spirit, through the spoken Word. It is just as exciting— yes, maybe even more so—than the wonders of that first week of creation.



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