

Wonder bread: John 6:24-35

by [Charles Hoffman](#) in the [July 25, 2006](#) issue

It is the day after Jesus fed the 5,000. The picnic is over and Jesus has taken his disciples to the other side of the lake. But the crowds of people who shared the meal with him yesterday and who then tried to turn him into their king are not about to let him go.

We can understand their feelings. After all, Jesus is their meal ticket. In their minds he has the potential to do something unheard of, to lighten the fundamental burdens of life that plague their existence. Who knows what he else he can do! If he can provide food, then he just might be able to do the same with shelter and clothing; he can protect them from the never-ending uncertainties of their lives. Who among us would not choose that sort of security? After all, in our time so much of our living is dedicated to the illusion that somehow our complete safety can be ensured and that we can be protected against all the ills and evils common to human existence. This delusional pursuit has become an obsession.

Soon the pursuing crowd catches up with Jesus and his entourage on the other side of the lake in Capernaum. There they greet him with a question: "Rabbi, when did you come here?" It sounds innocent enough, somewhat like saying, "Fancy meeting you here." But it means much more. They know something about him, but they want and need to know more. Their question is not limited to temporal time and place; it's a question about ultimate origins. They want to know where he came from and how he came to be. They remind us of a perplexed wine steward who wondered where the new wine had come from, or a woman who asked a visitor for the living water that he kept telling her about.

Judging by what happens next, we might conclude that Jesus would not make it in a "seeker-friendly" church. Although the people have been looking for him for hours and have crossed the lake to find him, Jesus detects an ulterior motive and candidly calls their bluff. "You worked all night to find me," he says, "because I represent a free lunch. You never read the sign; you missed the point completely."

Most of us are afraid to be that forthright. How many times, for example, have I received a person into church membership knowing that there is an underlying agenda and that joining the church is merely a means to some other goal? Or maybe that becoming a church member is an alternative to dealing with a pressing and difficult personal matter. In this case, Jesus takes the risk of doing something more pertinent and more useful than complying with the crowd's misguided agenda.

"I know what you are up to," he tells the crowd. "You came after me because of what happened yesterday when it was time to eat. You ate your fill and now you've come to see if you can exploit the situation. You aren't really interested in knowing who I am. Your question is a facade to cover your true intentions."

In other words, these people have followed Jesus for the wrong reasons. This should not surprise us; today it's still common practice. The Emperor Constantine is still with us, and we follow his historic example of exploiting the cause of Christ. Our culture has made an art of doing the same thing. Our culture has become the consummate expert at casting a pseudo-Christian veneer over its excesses and its shortfalls, its sins of commission and omission and its unexamined patriotism. We use Jesus to garner votes for unqualified leaders whose goals for their constituencies clash with his clear and simple teachings. We invoke his name to bless blatant injustices and immoral policies on a national and international stage.

Jesus will have none of it. He abhors such crass opportunism. In this instance, he doesn't even answer the people's question, but instead moves the conversation in a new direction.

"The bread you are after," he tells them, "will not last. Yesterday you assuaged your hunger. You ate the bread and now you are hungry again. There is food that perishes and there is food that lasts. God the Father has marked me to provide you the food that endures. So work for that food."

"How do we do that?" they ask. "How do we perform the works of God?"

The answer is disarmingly simple: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

The people aren't sure they can do that. With the aroma of yesterday's wonder bread still fresh in their nostrils, they have the audacity to ask for a sign. "Prove it," they say, and they recall their ancestors and Moses and the miraculous manna from

heaven. Whereupon Jesus reminds them that Moses was not the author of that bread. Rather, it came from “my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.”

In one way or another, each of us is challenged by a personal wilderness: painful loss, physical suffering, financial reverses, betrayal or bereavement. These are roads that we travel not by choice, but by necessity. A Spanish proverb speaks to this condition: “With bread and wine you can walk your road.” For us, Jesus is that sustaining bread.

Once more John has started with the literal meaning of a word and ended by having it point beyond itself to something more. The word itself becomes a sign: bread of life and Bread of Life. Then and now it all comes down to the same thing: it’s a matter of believing in the one who said, “I am the Bread of Life.”