

Wonder Bread vs. the bread of life (John 6:51-58)

Wonder Bread seems a good analogy for much of popular Christianity.

by [Katie Hines-Shah](#)

August 16, 2024

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

My father grew up on a small farm in Northern Minnesota. His family grew or made most of the food they consumed, including their own bread. Each week my grandmother would mix, knead, and bake. I can only imagine how the kitchen must have smelled. And yet, if the egg money came out right, as a special treat, my grandmother would skip this chore, go to the town store, and buy a loaf of Wonder Bread. Her children would rejoice. "It was just like cake," my father says, "so sweet, so soft, so white."

We live in an era of unprecedented choice. People can buy bread from a grocery store or bakery. They can make it from a mix in a countertop machine or in a Dutch oven using their own sourdough starter. We choose between bagels and naan, tortillas and brioche, marble rye and baguettes. Almost any bread can be gluten-free.

But pound for pound, dollar for dollar, slice by slice, Wonder Bread is still America's most popular bread. Sweet, soft, white, nutritionless Wonder Bread, the kind of bread I loved in childhood and hope to never feed my children now. Wonder Bread, as different from a real loaf of bread as day is from night.

Wonder Bread seems a good analogy for much of popular Christianity. The multisite parish (or denomination) promises brand consistency. The auditorium-style church offers a digestible service. Catchy songs, mass-produced decor, and sanitized Instagram feeds offer sweet pabulum in place of deeper theology. The Jesus depicted is, of course, inevitably White. Wonder Bread and the Christianity it echoes stand as counterexamples to the Bread of Life that is Jesus and the church he calls into being.

Wonder Bread is exclusive. The Bread of Life is accessible. Though Wonder Bread is popular, you can't get it everywhere. My grandmother drove two towns over to buy her loaf. Even today, wonderbread.com will not ship its product directly, instead redirecting consumers to stores within a 15-mile radius. Jesus, the living bread, twice proclaims that he "comes down" from heaven. One need not ask a store manager to stock the Bread of Life; the living father has sent him into the world. He doesn't come for a suggested manufacturer's price of \$2.92 but gives himself freely.

Wonder Bread lacks nutrition. The Bread of Life satisfies. Wonder Bread may use fortified flour enriched with vitamins and minerals, but it is no health food. With low fiber, added sugar, and a high salt content, Wonder Bread might taste good, but it leaves the eater hungry. Jesus points out a similar issue with "[the bread] your ancestors ate." During the Exodus, manna, like Wonder Bread, only satisfied for a day. And of course, everyone who ate it eventually died. In contrast, Jesus promises that everyone who eats the living bread will have his life in them, a life that supersedes human limitations.

Wonder Bread is transient. The Bread of Life lasts forever. As an exchange student in Germany, I encountered whole grain bakery bread for the first time. Having grown up on soft white loaves, I wrote to my parents in amazement, "I can put a sandwich in my backpack, and it won't get smashed!" Wonder Bread isn't very tough. For all its preservatives, it has a limited shelf life. The Bread of Life differs. As the living bread, Jesus promises he will abide in those who eat and drink his flesh and blood. Those in whom Jesus lives will be raised on the last day. They will never expire but will live forever.

The Christian community on earth is not (yet) the kingdom of heaven. As the church points to this expected end it would do well to reject Wonder Bread ideals, instead emulating the living bread of Jesus. Just as Jesus "comes down" from heaven, the church is to be in the world, accessible to all. Evangelism increasingly calls the church to open its doors and go out to the people, meeting them where they are.

That said, the church must not allow itself to be artificially sweetened and needlessly soft. Good theology, meaningful liturgy, engagement in study and service—these give the Christ follower something to chew on, a rich breadth and depth to digest, a mystery that satisfies beyond easy answers, and engaging work to savor.

Finally, we are reminded that the processed image of a White Jesus is false and cannot be the ideal of his church. The Christian community must be rich with diversity, fortified with authenticity, fulsome and fragrant with ideas old and new. The table becomes longer and joy more complete as new people join the feast.

The living bread from heaven challenges would-be believers, and yet only in partaking of it can the Christian hope to experience eternal life. The church, in its practices and preaching, must offer a foretaste of the feast to come. Jesus truly is the “wonder bread” in the fullest sense, the bread that feeds beyond all hope and expectation. The Christian community is called to make such faith using its own homegrown ingredients. Not all will prefer such fare, but, with the ferment of the Holy Spirit, the results will fill the world with fragrance and satisfy those who partake of it for all eternity.