

Essential question: John 6:56-69

Who is Jesus *really*? The answers are almost as varied as the believers.

by [Cynthia M. Campbell](#) in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

For five weeks the lectionary journey through the Gospel of Mark is interrupted by a brief sojourn into the sixth chapter of John. The chapter opens with two familiar stories from the synoptic Gospels: the feeding of the multitude (a story so important that it appears six times in the four Gospels) and Jesus walking on the water. Then there are dialogues, first with the crowd and then with “the Jews” (probably better understood as Judean officials) about the meaning of the miracle of the feeding and about Jesus’ true identity. As is often the case with John, small, ordinary words such as *bread* and *life* are freighted with theological meaning. Jesus provided bread, but his bread is not like the manna that God provided in the wilderness; this bread is himself, his very life; and those who eat it “will live forever.”

In this final scene, the conversation shifts from an external debate to an internal struggle among Jesus’ followers. Some are murmuring among themselves: “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Even the reader, who knows that Jesus has been using ordinary words to refer to extraordinary things, is inclined to agree: “Whoever eats me will live because of me.” Centuries of eucharistic theology give us a way to understand these words, but at the time they were more than puzzling—they probably were downright offensive. Rightly reading the mood, Jesus says, “Does this offend you?”

His challenge sets up a critical turning point in this Gospel. Not only are we told that one of Jesus’ followers would betray him; we also learn that some of those who had been following Jesus “turned back and no longer went about with him.” This division in the ranks (implied much later in the other Gospels) is made explicit here. The group gets smaller as the stakes get higher.

Jesus then turns to the Twelve and says, “Do you also wish to go away?” Peter plays the spokesperson, just as he does in the other Gospels: “Lord, to whom can we go?”

You have the words of eternal life.” While the words are different, this interchange is much the same as Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi. There, Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?”—to which Peter responds, “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8:27-30). In both cases, the miracle of the feeding is the backdrop for the crucial question: who is Jesus *really*?

This is, of course, the perennial Christian question. The answers are almost as varied as the believers. The first 400 years of the church’s life were largely given over to debates about the meaning and implications of confessing Jesus as Savior, Lord and Son of God, and the answers were shaped by the believers’ contexts. The controversies of the early years of the church’s life were conducted in the terms of Greek philosophy, and the issues were about what sort of *being* Jesus was (“fully human, fully God” is how the creed was finally formulated), and how he was related to God the Father (*homoousion*, or “one in being,” was the conclusion).

In the modern period, Jesus has been reinterpreted with both disastrous and constructive consequences. Some Christians during the Nazi regime in Germany attempted to turn Jesus, a Jew from Palestine, into an Aryan superhero. Karl Barth recognized the travesty and declared, in the “Theological Declaration of Barmen,” that the true Christ is the one revealed in scripture and is Lord of culture, not subject to it. In more recent years, theologians from Latin America found in Jesus an ally in the struggle of justice for the poor. While it is difficult to find any particular economic or political philosophy in Jesus’ teachings, his care for those on the margins of society and criticism of those who exploited or rejected them is evident in the Gospels.

Publications produced by members of the Jesus Seminar (Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan and others) and those who question or counter their conclusions (N. T. Wright and Luke Timothy Johnson) have fed public interest in the person and significance of Jesus. The seminar seeks to understand Jesus by looking at biblical stories and his teaching in light of what can be known or presumed about the context or circumstances in which he lived. The second group wants to take the account of Jesus’ life and ministry preserved in scripture as both faithful record and record of faith.

These scholars have provided intriguing and inspiring insights, and generations to come will add more because the question of who Jesus is will never be exhausted. It is more than a question of getting the right data (or getting the data right); it is a

question of faith and of relationship. Each generation, in its own peculiar and particular context, will have new questions and new insights. There will always be mistakes, and our scholarship will sometimes lead to dead ends. But because we are accompanied in this enterprise by the Holy Spirit, our study and preaching may lead to new insights and fresh understanding.

In *The Essential Jesus*, Crossan points out that one of the most popular visual representations of Jesus in the early years of the Christian movement was the feeding of the multitude. Long before Christians portrayed Christ crucified they showed him breaking bread. Crossan suggests that this reflects the context of the first Christians as urban poor people for whom bread was a daily concern. Perhaps it is also a reflection of a fundamental insight: Jesus and bread, eating and feeding, table fellowship and faith, food and life—these things go together. “Whoever eats me will live because of me.” Blessed are we if we do not take offense but are led by these words to abundant life.