

THE CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS

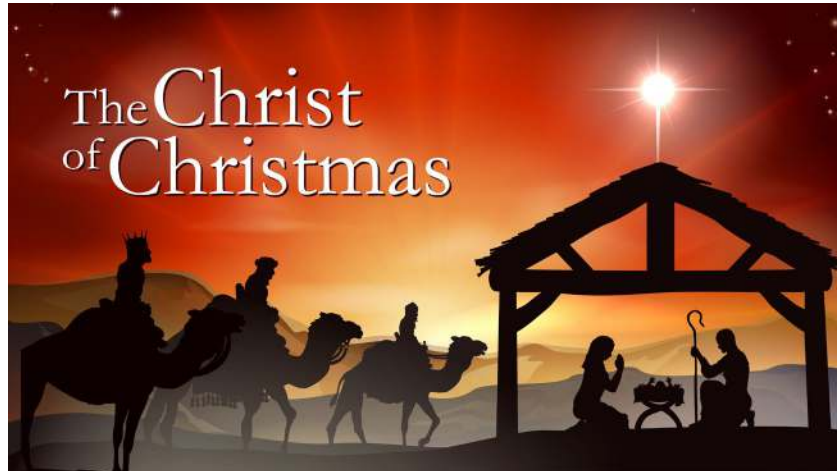
Expositional Study Of Christ's "I Am" Statements

John 6:22-51

Written By

©Pastor Marty Baker

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Ligonier Ministries, founded by the late R. C. Sproul in 1971, recently released their analysis of *The State of Theology in 2018*.¹ The findings are as interesting as they are alarming. Concerning the holiness of God, a robust 69 percent of Americans disagree with the following statement:

Even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.

Where the theology of the Bible is not flexible where sin is concerned in relation to the holiness of God, the culture at large embraces an ever-increasing flexibility. This is a slippery slope because if man does not see his sinful status before a holy God, then how can he be, or why should he be, saved?

More disconcerting the fact that 52 percent of evangelicals agree with this modern assertion:

Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.

Romans chapters 1, 3, and 5 teach otherwise as we've learned in our current sermon series titled *The Road of the Righteous*. Again, if man is good by nature, then why would he need a Savior? And if this premise is true, what does this mean in reference to the gospel which says otherwise? Should the gospel be modified to fit the cultural change?

With all of this slow slippage away from the sound theology of the Bible, it is no wonder that 78 percent of Evangelicals agree with this erroneous statement:

¹"The State of Theology," *Ligonier Ministries*, accessed November 29, 2018, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/state-theology-questions-matter-most/>.

Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.

That, of course, is not what Jesus said about himself in his famous seven *I Am* statements in the book of John.

1. I am the bread of life, John 6:35, 41, 48, 51
2. I am the light of the world, John 8:12; 9:5
3. I am the door, John 10:7, 9, 11, 14
4. I am the good shepherd, 10:11-14
5. I am the resurrection and the life, John 11:25
6. I am the way, the truth, and the life, John 14:6
7. I am the true vine, John 15:1-5

Grammatically, the first person personal pronoun, *ego* (ἐγώ), wedded to the present tense copula, *eimi* (εἰμι), could not be more emphatic in Greek. With this unique construction, Jesus establishes His eternal ontological existence, absolute deity, sole provision for sinners, and His various inexorable roles as the God-man where mankind is concerned.

Since many Christians, and ultimately non-Christians, are confused about who Jesus is, I think it is imperative for us this Christmas to pause and pour over this famous *I Am* statements. Why? I can think of several answers. One, for Christians to be confused regarding the identity of Jesus is to embrace false teaching. This, in turn, will have a negative impact on a believer's desire to share the true gospel of Jesus. We see this much in Paul's confrontational letter to the Galatian church (Gal. 1). Two, for non-Christians to fail to correctly understand who Jesus was/is to leave them in a state of spiritual death.

Because so much is at stake, then, it behooves us to ponder Christ's *I Am* statements. This is, of course, no dry theological exercise. Far from it. It is theology which should lead to radical life change. So, we start where Jesus started with His claim in John 6 that He was none other than *THE Bread of Life* in John 6. The article "the" is italicized because he didn't claim he was "a bread" (indefinite) among many spiritual/theological breads, but the (definite) one and only which leads to life eternal (viz., ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς, Jn. 6:35). More on that in a moment. For now, it is enough for us to pose a question which naturally arises from this historical narrative exchange between Jesus and the unbelieving Jews of His day:

Which Spiritual Bread Are You Eating? (John 6:22-51)

Before we dig into this narrative pericope, we first need to pay attention to the immediate historical context. According to John 6:1-15, Jesus had just miraculously fed the 5,000 on the east side of the lake called Galilee by multiplying a young boy's sack lunch consisting two small fish and five barley loaves. Actually, more than 5,000 people experienced this miracle of miracles because this number just included the men (John 6:10). Easily, more than 10,000 people witnessed this supernatural, divine act. If anyone should have believed Jesus was God, it should have been these people. Hold that thought.

In this next historical panel (John 6:16-21), John informs us that Jesus sent the disciples northwest to Capernaum, their home base, while he remained behind on land to pray in the

mountains (Matt. 14:23; Mark 6:46). At the fourth watch of the night between three and six a.m., and after the disciples had rowed some three or three and half miles into the middle of the lake (John 6:19), a fierce storm engulfed them and threatened to sink the boat. Suddenly, when all hope was almost lost, Jesus came walking to them on the water. After He calmed their fears and climbed into the boat, the storm immediately abated, and then the boat miraculously sped across the rest of the lake to the small port at Capernaum (John 6:21).

Understanding the context, as you might guess, is all-important as we consider Christ's first emphatic *I Am* statement. Simply put, since He can feed 10,000 people with meager supplies and He can walk on deep, tumultuous water, make a storm cease instantly, and move wooden vessel full of men quickly to land without a powerful engine, then the first *I Am* statement must be true.

With the context, therefore, in mind, coupled with our opening homiletical question, we at the battle between the breads.

The Contrasts Between The Breads (John 6:22-49)

Breads is pluralized for good reason for just as there is the true seed of the gospel surrounded by a plethora of false religious seeds (Matt. 13:24-30), so there is true spiritual bread and false ones masquerading as the true one. Please, keep this concept in mind as we sink our interpretive spades into the rich soil of this enlightening passage. John sets us Christ's first *I Am* statement by first establishing the historical context.

²² The next day the multitude that stood on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other small boat there, except one, and that Jesus had not entered with His disciples into the boat, but *that* His disciples had gone away alone. ²³ There came other small boats from Tiberias near to the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ When the multitude therefore saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got into the small boats, and came to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

While it is hard to determine exactly what happened here, it appears that the next day after Christ fed the 10,000 and finished the amazing day off by walking on the water as if it were solid ground the people wondered where He went. They had seen Him send the disciples out to sea without Him, and now other boats from the western shore of Tiberias had arrived, but Jesus was nowhere in sight? Where did He go? Knowing that Jesus liked Capernaum, the home and fishing base of Peter, they piled in the boats bobbing on the shoreline of the lake and headed northwest to locate Him.

As we study what occurred when they located him in this small and quaint seaside town, we will quickly notice how the narrative panels vacillate between two poles: *Our Problem* and *His Provision*. The former denotes our natural inclination to partake of the wrong spiritual bread(s), while the latter denotes Christ's revelation concerning Himself as the true spiritual bread. Once more, the tension builds to a pragmatic life question: *which spiritual bread are you eating?*

Panel 1: Our Problem. Once they located Jesus on land, they ask Him what appears to be a logical question.

²⁵ And when they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?"

I would submit this is the wrong question. They should have said, “How did you get here?” Why should they have asked this? Because He really had, from their perspective, two options for getting to Capernaum: by boat or by foot. Since a boat wasn’t available for Him the night before, they must have assumed He walked in the dark during a storm. He walked, all right, it just wasn’t on land, but on water. Had they asked him “How did you get here?” instead of “when did you get here?” they might have led to an eye-opening discussion/answer of how He walked three miles into the stormy lake in the darkness, then He located the disciples among the swells, stilled the storm, and moved their boat from one location to another by controlling the limited dimension of our world.

Ostensibly, all of this makes me wonder this Christmas, Are you guilty of asking Jesus the wrong question or questions?” You should be asking Him questions which lead to you understanding that He wasn’t just a man or a prophet, but He was/is the God-man and THE Prophet (Deut. 18). Our problem, however, is we tend to hide in our unbelief behind the wrong question of questions about Jesus.

Panel 1: His Provision. What is His provision for misguided sinners? First, you’ll note He didn’t answer their question.

²⁶ Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled.

Makes you want to take a deep gulp. Jesus is not obligated to answer all of your questions. He, on the other hand, is concerned that you understand your true spiritual condition. To accomplish this worthy goal with the Jewish crowd of cronies before Him, He, who knows all things (Matt. 9:4; 12:25; Mark 4:22; Luke 11:17; 8:17), went right to the real motive as to *why* the crowd followed Him to Capernaum. They were not spiritually minded but earthly minded. They were not hungry spiritually, but physically. They didn’t want spiritual bread but physical bread. So, to wake them up to their true spiritual condition, Jesus went straight to their motives. He’ll do the same to you. Your questions and statements (they “respectfully” called him Rabbi), don’t fool Him because He knows why you pose these questions and make these statements. You are all about making yourself look religiously and morally acceptable so you can continue to eat the wrong spiritual bread.

He, on the contrary, is all about showing you the eternal error of your way. This is exactly what He did out of love for these spiritually lost Jews in Capernaum:

²⁷ "Do not work for the food which perishes,

In the Greek text of John, Christ emphatically forbids an act in progress (a present tense imperative with a negative, viz., ἐργάζεσθε μὴ τὴν βρωσιν τὴν ἀπολλυμένην). He sharply confronts these people for *totally* disregarding the miracle of the multiplication and *only* being concerned with earthly food. They thought more about their bellies than their souls.

Are you guilty? Is this you? How often have you relegated the miracles of Christ recorded in the Scriptures to a dark corner of your life, so you can cling to bread, be what it may, which does not satisfy your soul? How often have you looked at the miraculous construction of the complex cosmos around you and just shrugged your shoulders and concluded it is just a statistical anomaly? Donald Page, who has studied stars his entire life, estimates that the odds our cosmos just happened in one out of 10^{10} (123). That the number “ten followed by a billion billion billion

zeros repeated a billion billion times.”² Since “the number of seconds that have occurred since the beginning of the universe is about 10^{18} ,³ which is a ten followed by eighteen zeros, there is mathematically no way we just happened to pop into existence. We left with one logical conclusion: divine miraculous action has occurred on a grand, complex scale. But still man holds onto the false bread of scientism.

If this is you, Jesus lovingly confronts and challenges you to switch food groups. Here’s how he did this with the misguided Jews in His day:

but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, *even* God, has set His seal.”

They focused on earthly food when they should have focused on heavenly food which results not in temporal life but in eternal life. He then informed them, and us, that He and He alone has the ability to give this kind of food to spiritually hungry people.

Panel 2: Our Problem. What is our problem? Sin has blinded our thinking (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 4:18)), and our own pride keeps us from coming to God on His terms. It was the same problem with the Jews in Capernaum as we see in the next verse of this verbal exchange with Jesus:

²⁸ They said therefore to Him, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?”

Sinful, prideful man is convinced he must do things in order to receive things, especially when it comes to spiritual things. Note how these Jews blew right past Christ’s confrontational words. Their response illustrates how spiritually blind they really were. They heard the word “work” and immediately thought, “Oh, He’s asking us what religious works must we do to make God pleased with us?” Concerning this misguided mindset, Arthur Pink’s words are most illuminating:

They supposed they had to do some work; but what works they were ignorant. It was the old self-righteousness of the natural man, who is ever occupied with his own doings. The carnal mind is flattered when it is consciously doing something for God. For his doings man deems himself entitled to reward. He imagines that salvation is due him, because he has earned it. Thus does he reckon the reward ‘not of grace, but of debt.’ Man seeks to bring God into the humbling position of debtor to him. How unbelief and pride degrade the Almighty!⁴

Shocking, isn’t it? Jesus just told them, as He has told you, that eternal life is something He and He alone GIVES sinners. We do not work for it. Did the selfish, arrogant sinners get the memo? No. All they could do was focus on the stale bread of religious works to secure eternal life with God. Is this you? Are you focused on your works or upon His work? This is the question this Christmas.

Panel 2: His Provision. Jesus’ response to these self-absorbed sinners is most loving, patient, and precise:

²J. P. Moreland and Time Muelhoff, *The God Conversation* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2007), 146.

³Ibid.

⁴Arthur Pink, *Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1975), 319.

²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."

They focused, and wrongly so, on religious works, which are nothing short of false, inferior spiritual bread. Jesus focused, and rightly so, on faith related to His redemptive work. They needed belief in order to please God, and they certainly had enough evidence to from the miracle of the feeding of the 10,000, didn't they? Yes, Jesus doesn't call the sinner to blind, illogical faith, but faith wedded to hard and fast supernatural evidence embedded in time and history. Yes, they needed to place their faith in the One who was sent from heaven by the Father, and the evidence they had in hand certainly verified He was, in fact, no ordinary man, but the God-man. Jesus, of course, has the same message for you this Christmas. Your works won't garner God's favor. Only faith in Christ's redemptive work on the cross moves a sinner to sainthood. So, what about it? Do you still cling to the wrong food, or are you willing to eat the meal God has placed before you in order to secure your eternal redemption?

The next panel demonstrates how tenaciously and arrogantly we hold onto our false bread:

Panel 3: Our Problem. Our problem is when we don't want to come to God on His terms, we arrogantly challenge Him to do things to wow us to believe in Him . . . despite the fact He has given us plenty to be wowed about. Mark well the blind pride in those who hold to a false religious bread which can't satisfy the soul:

³⁰ They said therefore to Him, "What then do You do for a sign, that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform?"

For them, seeing is believing. For Jesus, believing is seeing.

You cannot read their words and not feel like you must blush in embarrassment in lieu of their utter self-consumption. He had just miraculously fed the 10,000 with a paltry amount of food, and they had the gumption to ask for a bigger, better, and bolder sign so they could believe. Once more I must ask, Are you guilty of the same response to God's greatest evidences given to you? Do you say, "Well, God, what I just learned is most amazing and certainly seems to point to you, but I need more convincing evidence before I, of all people, believe." God, my friend, doesn't have to give you any more signs. Your world is already full of them, and so are the Scriptures.

The pride of these fickle, faithless people reaches its pinnacle with this next shocking and biting statement:

³¹ "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread out of heaven to eat.'"

They, of all people, got biblical with Jesus. They took Him (of all people) back to how Israel received manna/"heavenly bread" from God for, basically, forty years in the wilderness. The well-known story is embedded in the Torah of Exodus 16. They, then, weaponized the story by making it a challenge to Jesus. In so many words, this is what they said, "Say, Jesus, Moses was the man because he fed the entire nation for almost forty years with bread for heaven, and so you just merely feed 10,000 of us with a few loaves you multiplied. That sign doesn't even compare to that of Moses. So do something to the magnitude of Moses the man and we'll believe."

Is your jaw on the proverbial floor? Sinners can be so cocky, can they not? Again, I must ask, "Are you posing provocative scenarios to the living God, scenarios which betray your own indomitable arrogance?" Such is the activity of those who feast on the bread which does not

satisfy the eternal soul. They mock God and reveal by their questions and statements just how earthbound and sinful they really are.

How does the Savior, the Shepherd of lost sheep respond to the spiritual provocateurs? He responds with love and clarity by pointing to His provision for them:

Panel 3: His Provision. As before, Jesus' provision openly confronts the false thinking of the people in question. What He did with them, He'll do with you, as well.

³² Jesus therefore said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. ³³ "For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world."

First, He corrected them regarding Moses. Moses was a great man of God, but they inappropriately focused on the man God used to bring manna to hungry people, not on the God behind the man. This makes you want to ask yourself: "Am I in need of God re-focusing how I think? Am I looking at the earthly while neglecting the heavenly?" "What or who is distracting me from really seeing spiritual truth?" Second, Jesus reminds them that Moses merely gave them earthly/temporal food out of the earthly heaven, while the Father God has given them heavenly/eternal bread out of heaven itself. The implication should not be missed: the former bread satisfied but for the moment and left the person physically hungry ultimately, while the latter bread completely and definitively fulfills man's spiritual hunger. This bread, which Jesus doesn't identify yet, also serves to give life, eternal life, to those who partake of it in all of the world, which is a far greater number than the size of the nation of Israel who ate manna.

Thank God that when we think we have the right bread to live by, when we smugly think we are right and He is wrong, He loves us enough to confront us with life-giving truth. Has He, the Lord of all time, arrested your attention yet?

From the next panel of this conversation, we learn how difficult it is for non-Christians to come clean of sin.

Panel 4: Our Problem.

³⁴ They said therefore to Him, "Lord, evermore give us this bread."

They said this, but from what we know of the rest of the passage, especially verse 36, they didn't mean it in a spiritual sense. Like the woman at the well in John 4, they wanted physical bread as she wanted physical water so she didn't have to come to the well in the heat of the day anymore. The scales of sin *still* covered their blind eyes. Perhaps you, too, this Christmas still have the scales of sin blinding your eyes, despite all you've heard and know about Jesus. There is hope for you because He is the God who will not give up on you in your unbelief. We see this truth displayed in all of its glory in the fourth instructive panel.

Panel 4: His Provision. What is His spiritual provision for man's spiritual malady? Himself.

³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst."

Christ's statement is most emphatic in Greek as He identifies himself: *I am the bread of life*. This is who He is beyond all time and space as the eternal God. He always is the true bread which gives spiritual/eternal life to those who partake of Him by faith.

What a worthy and appropriate image, especially for the Messiah born in Bethlehem, which is literally in Hebrew the *house of bread* (בֵּית-לֶחֶם, Micah 5:1-2). Bread is necessary for physical life. It is the staple of physical life. Hence, it is fitting that He is the bread for spiritual life. Bread is available to all for physical sustenance. He is rightfully the bread for spiritual sustenance. Bread is what we enjoy daily for life. He, as the bread, is what we enjoy daily when we know Him. Bread, especially fresh bread, is something man enjoys. Jesus, as such, is that aromatic bread we, who know Him by faith, can't wait to be near. Bread, as we know it, doesn't become bread until first the wheat stalk dies, then it is cut down, winnowed, ground, and placed in the fire. Jesus, as the bread, certainly knew this process as He went to the cross for us, and He came out the other side as THE Bread, the bread of life eternal. Those who come to Him now in faith, not works, will not hunger spiritually any longer, nor will they have a spiritual thirst. On the contrary, He will meet their deepest spiritual needs. Has He met yours?

With verse 36, Jesus gets real with the Jews in the audience that day.

³⁶ "But I said to you, that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe.

They had personally witnessed Him doing a bread miracle beyond anything Moses ever dreamt of, but still they persisted in their unbelief. Once more, He, the Bread of Life, loved them enough, and He loves you enough, to confront them with the hard, cold facts of their unbelief masquerading as belief.

He, then, let them in on some much-needed spiritual and theological truth:

³⁷ "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. ³⁸ "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. ³⁹ "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.

⁴⁰ "For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day."

Jesus informs them that their unbelief did not rock His world because He understood His holy mission. His job is to be the Bread, and it is the Father's job to move people from unbelief to belief. And when that wonderful event occurs, when that person eats, by faith, of the true heavenly Bread, Jesus, the Bread, will never cast them out of His family, ever! Did not Peter partake of the Bread? Indeed. Did not Peter desert Christ three times the night of His betrayal. Indeed. Did the Bread of Life cast Peter out? No. He challenged him post-resurrection to feed His sheep in His absence (John 21:15-25). What love. Jesus even lovingly assures us that when we partake of this Bread by faith we not only have eternal life perpetually, but we can bank on the fact that we'll all be raised to eternal life in resurrected bodies on the day of resurrection (John 5:24-30).

I must ask you the logical question: Is Jesus your Bread of Life or are you eating a lesser bread which cannot satisfy your soul? I ask the question because from what we see in the next panel, sinful man is strong-willed and finds all kinds of reasons not to eat, by faith, of Christ, the true bread.

Panel 5: Our Problem.

⁴¹ The Jews therefore were grumbling about Him, because He said, "I am the bread that came down out of heaven." ⁴² And they were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son

of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I have come down out of heaven '?"

Grumbling is nothing more than griping. Despite the miraculous evidence at hand, they chose to retreat into vain, earthbound thinking. "How could he be from heaven when we all know his father and where He came from? This guy is from Nazareth up the hill from Capernaum. What a joke for Him to claim He is from heaven. He's crazy."

We marvel at Christ's response to their biting sarcasm and mockery. It's displayed in His next statement.

Panel 5: His Provision. As before, Jesus loved them enough to confront them in their unbelief. He will do the same to you because He loves you.

⁴³ Jesus answered and said to them, "Do not grumble among yourselves.

Next, He gave them some divine insight into the process of moving from spiritual death to spiritual life:

⁴⁴ "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught of God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me.

Salvation is synergistic (viz., an act of God *and* our free choice), not monergistic (an act of God alone).⁵ God gives us the evidences and reasons to come to Him, His Spirit convicts us of our sin (John 14, 16), and our free will responds by either accepting His Bread or rejecting it. Jesus, therefore, rests in the drawing of the Father for effectiveness in His ministry. He is the Bread and simply calls man to partake of Him. Whether they are drawn is the Father's business.

To those who said earlier in the conversation they'd love to have the Bread Jesus spoke about, Jesus circles back around one more time and explains in clear terms what He is talking about:

⁴⁶ "Not that any man has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ "I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.

He underscores that He is the true spiritual Bread because He is from heaven itself. He underscores that eternal life comes to those who believe He is the Bread. Lastly, He warns them that to eat of physical bread or the wrong bread is to eat death, not life. In light of this, we must ask, "What bread are you eating this Christmas season? That which leads to life or death?"

In this verbal exchange, Jesus contrasted false bread with the true Bread, where spiritual life is concerned. He left his crowd with no question about who He was and why He came. The contrasts taught them that much. Now, a decision was in order. We encounter this in the final two verses.

⁵Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 136.

The Challenge Of The Best Bread (John 6:50-51)

Here is the challenge:

⁵⁰ "This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh."

Christ's speaks here by way of strict metaphor. To those who partake of Him, by faith, as the Bread of Life gain life eternal. No other "bread," viz., religious system of belief, can do this.

His words, therefore, leave us with one pragmatic, personal question: Which bread are you eating this Christmas? The one which leads to death, the one which doesn't satisfy the soul, or the One which is Jesus? There are many false breads in our world, but only One which satisfies the hunger of the lost, hopeless soul.

The Bread is ready for the taking. Who will come?