



an apprenticeship with Jesus in the art of spiritual conversation

HOLY CONVERSATION Session Six—Radical Claims: John 6 (selected verses)

Key verse: *I AM the bread of life* (6:35). Spiritual conversation inevitably moves to the subject of the exclusive claims of Jesus. In this passage, Jesus makes a radical claim: “I AM the bread of life.” John’s Gospel emphasizes Jesus’ explicit teaching about himself. As they were in Jesus’ time, these exclusive claims are a scandal to today’s postmodern culture. The conversationalist must wrestle with how to honestly communicate these claims without shutting down the ongoing conversation. The primary application point for this session is to study the “I AM’s” in John and to practice communicating these claims thoughtfully and humbly.

I. DEBRIEFING

- a. **The exclusive claims of Jesus are increasingly controversial in today’s culture. How do you typically respond when someone asks, “Are you one of those narrow-minded Christians who says Jesus is the ‘only way’? Do you really believe that your way is the only ‘right’ way?”**
- b. Lesson overview
 - i. **Spiritual conversation inevitably moves to the subject of the exclusive claims of Christ.**
 - ii. **These claims are a scandal to our postmodern culture.**
 - iii. **Today we explore ways to faithfully represent these claims without shutting down the conversation.**

II. ENCOUNTERING THE STORY

- a. Engage the senses: DVD clip from *The Gospel of John*
 - i. Pre-viewing-assignment: **Try to put yourself in the place of the disciples on the hillside in the presence of the crowd. What is your initial reaction to Jesus’ statement “you feed them”? What might you be feeling and thinking as you were passing out the (multiplied) loaves and fishes?**
 - ii. View DVD
 - iii. Debrief DVD

b. Read **The Text in Context: Jesus’ *Bread of Life Conversation*.**

This entire narrative takes place in the region of Galilee, near the town of Tiberius. Review the map (SESSION SIX APPENDIX 1) to become familiar with the geography of this region.

Note that John’s dialogue pattern reappears in this conversation. Jesus begins with a provocative statement (“you are seeking me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill”), followed by the crowd’s misunderstanding. Jesus gives an explanation and the people respond with startled unbelief.

The account of the feeding of the 5,000 appears in all four Gospels (see Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:32-44; Lk 9:10-17). John's version has several unique characteristics, including the mention of Passover (6:4), the naming of Philip and Andrew (both are also named in the "come and see" passage, John 1:29-51), the "test" (when Jesus asked "where will we find food?"), the mention of the young boy and his lunch, Jesus' personal involvement in the distribution of the bread, and the crowd's dramatic response.

As stated in the opening session, one of the unique aspects of the Fourth Gospel is Jesus' explicit claim to deity. Chapter six includes the first of the "I AM's" of John. Three times Jesus makes the claim, "I AM the bread of life" (6:35, 48, 51). The "I AM's" of Jesus are central to John's Gospel. See also 8:58 ("Before Abraham was, I AM"); 9:5 ("I AM the light of the world"); 10:7 ("I AM the gate"); 10:11 ("I AM the good shepherd"); 11:25 ("I AM the resurrection and the life"); 14:6 ("I AM the way, the truth, and the life"); 15:1 ("I AM the vine"). Note that several of the "I AM's" are connected to signs (ex. as Jesus heals the blind man he asserts, "I AM the light of the world").

John's account of the loaves and fishes is filled with rich imagery from the Old Testament:

(1) John connects this story to the Jewish Passover (6:4), providing an explicitly theological context. Passover was the Jewish Feast that celebrated the Lord's mighty liberation of his people from Pharaoh and Egypt (Exodus 12). The Jewish Passover "Seder" feast involved a full liturgy that included giving thanks, breaking and distributing bread, and a series of responses to questions asked by children. Some scholars see striking similarities between John's account of the feeding of the 5,000 and the Passover liturgy practiced by Jews in the time of Jesus.

(2) Manna in the wilderness. During their wilderness wanderings, the Israelites often grumbled about their circumstances. This included complaints about the lack of food (Exodus 16:1-5) and about the *kind* of food with which they were provided (Numbers 11). In each case, the Lord graciously provided for his people, yet he also tested the people to see if they would trust him. John 6 is filled with allusions to these incidents from Israel's wilderness wanderings. As the Israelites were to Moses, so the Galilean crowds are to Jesus. Note the similarities as you read and discuss this passage.

(3) The messianic hope. One of the Old Testament allusions to a Messiah is in Deuteronomy 18:15, where the Lord promises to raise up a "prophet like Moses." In the messianic kingdom, it was believed that a storehouse of manna would be reopened, and that this would happen at Passover. You can see why the crowds were so stirred up to make Jesus king. Their vision of a Messiah was a political liberator, and they were about to press Jesus into this role when they began to see the messianic implications of this incident.

(4) Elisha and the barley loaves. The most dramatic Old Testament allusion to the Feeding of the 5,000 is found in 2 Kings 4:42-44. The points of similarity between the two narratives are amazing. Barley bread is brought to Elijah (the bread of the poor), and he says "give it to the people to eat." His servant, like the disciples, asks "how can I set this before so many?" Elisha promises they will eat and have some left over, and so it was.

(5) Come to me. Jesus' invitation and promise in 6:35 ("whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty") is similar to that of Isaiah 55:1-2, where the prophet makes an invitation to eat and drink in the kingdom.

c. Interactive Bible Study: John 6:1-15, 25-51

i. Read 6:1-15.

1. What was the nature of the "test" Jesus gave his disciples?

viii. Read 6:60, 66-69.

1. What are the different responses to Jesus?

2. What was “hard” about Jesus’ teaching?

III. LIVING INTO THE STORY

a. Gather in subgroups:

i. **It is one thing to acknowledge that all people have a spiritual hunger deep within. It is another to claim that Jesus is the solution to humanity’s hunger. How do people in your world respond to this claim?**

ii. **How can we honestly communicate these claims without shutting down an ongoing conversation?**

b. Call subgroups together and have them summarize answers to question ii above.

c. Leader’s input: Session review.

i. **Jesus makes radical claims about himself (ex. the “I AM’s”).**

ii. **As they were in Jesus’ time, these claims are a scandal to our postmodern culture.**

iii. **As in Jesus’ day, some will turn away when these claims are presented. Don’t take this personally!**

iv. **We seek to faithfully represent Jesus’ controversial claims without shutting down the ongoing conversation.**

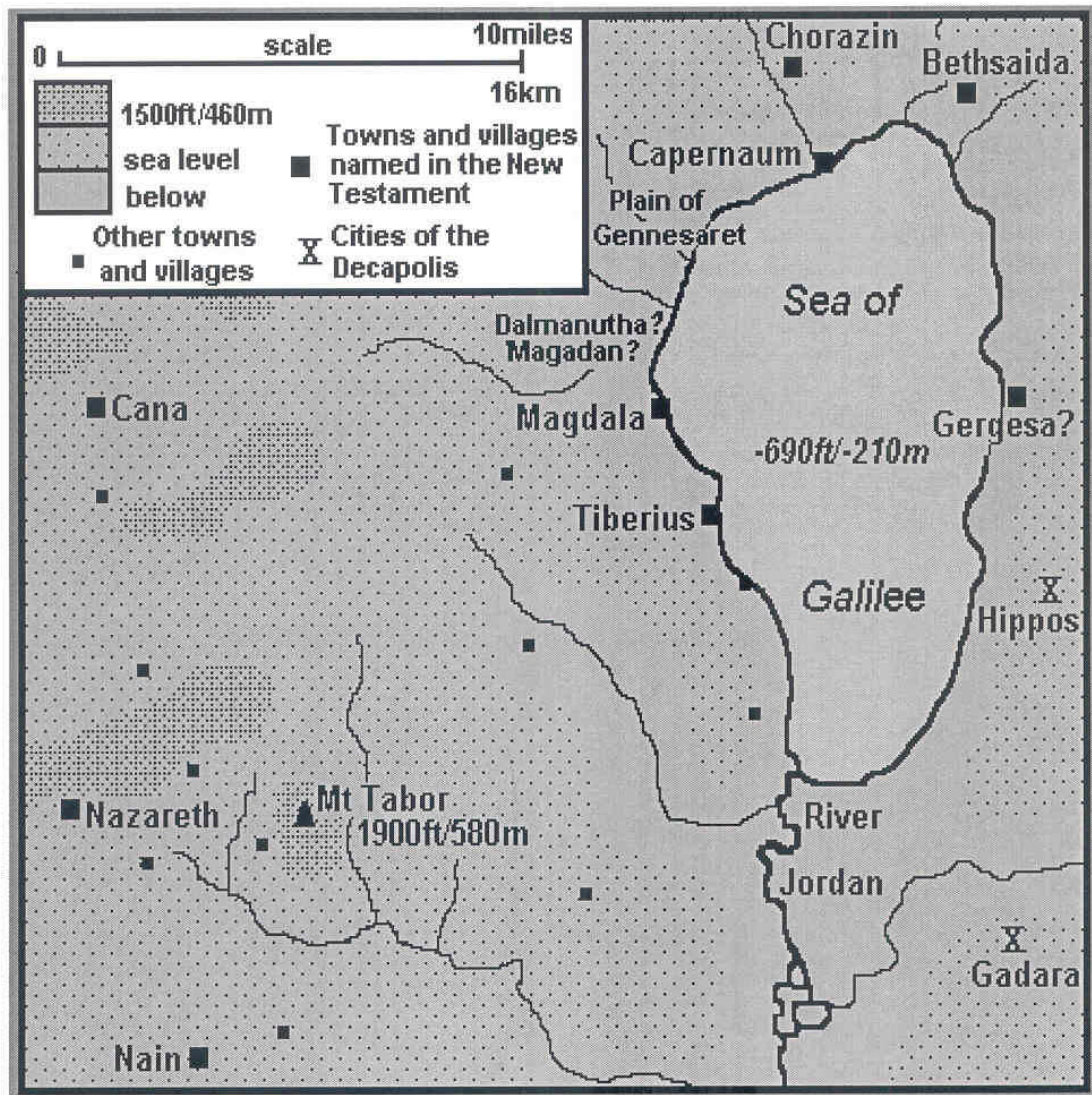
Session Six Appendix

APPENDIX 1

The Region of Galilee in the Time of Christ

SESSION SIX APPENDIX 1

The Region of Galilee in the Time of Christ



Source: JB Phillips New Testament <http://www.ccel.org/bible/phillips/CP051GOSPELMAPS.htm>