

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 207—Jesus' Misunderstood Food in John 4

"The podcast that aims to start conversations about the oneness and unity of God and about the humanity of Jesus."

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Introduction

We are continuing our ongoing series that is closely examining the Johannine theme of misunderstanding (beginning in episode 204). As you will surely recall, the theme of misunderstanding in the Gospel of John appears like this:

- First, Jesus makes an ambiguous statement.
- Second, the conversation partner misunderstands it, either by interpreting it literally or by asking an inappropriate question.
- Third, either Jesus or the narrating author explains the statement (although sometimes the explanation is missing [but implied]).

This week's episode will look closely at the exchange between the disciples and Jesus within John chapter 4. In doing so, we will discuss what actually nourishes Jesus, what it means for the Christology of the Gospel of John, how it defines the concept of agency, and how we should approach statements of Jesus having been sent by God.

What is Jesus' food and why is it important for correctly understanding the relationship between God and Jesus in the Gospel of John

Let's find out on this week's episode of the BUP!

1. Jesus' Exchange with His Disciples Regarding Food in Samaria

- *Meanwhile, the disciples were urging Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. (John 4:31-34)*
- *"Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this case, the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor." From that city, many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all the things that I have done." So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. Many more believed because of His word (John 4:35-41)*

2. Examining the Theme of Misunderstanding Involving Jesus' Food

- First, Jesus makes an ambiguous statement
 - i. *Meanwhile, the disciples were urging Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." (4:31-32)*
 - 1. Ordinary food
- Second, the conversation partner misunderstands it, either by interpreting it literally or by asking an inappropriate question
 - i. *So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?" (4:33)*
- Third, either Jesus or the narrating author explains the statement (although sometimes the explanation is missing [but implied]).
 - i. *Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. (4:34)*
 - 1. Accomplish - τελειώσω from the verb τελειόω
 - a. But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish-- the very works that I do-- testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me. (John 5:36)
 - b. I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. (John 17:4)
 - 2. "My food is to obey the one who sent me"

- a. Defines “God” - τοῦ πέμψαντός (aorist part.) - “the one who sent me” - Jesus defines God as one person, clearly the Father alone.
- ii. The theme of misunderstanding points to the person of Jesus, the Christology of the 4th Gospel, the nature of Jesus’ relationship to God, and an important point that the author wants to impress upon his readers.
 1. We can’t simply say that the disciples thought that Jesus was speaking of ordinary food. In other words, it does us no good to only say “Jesus didn’t mean this.” What *did* Jesus mean?
 2. Jesus found nourishment in obeying God, in functioning as an agent, and bringing to fulfillment the work for which he has been tasked.

3. The Christological Implications to Correctly Understanding Jesus’ Food

- “Sent” - a loaded word
 - Agent
 - An agent is sent by his/her master, and if the agent is to obey the master by doing the master’s will, then the agent is subordinate to the master (not coequal)
 - This is not a coequal Father sending a coequal son, this is a superior Father, God the Father, sending his subordinate son as the agent
 - As an agent, Jesus does the will of God
 - The works of Jesus are the works of God the Father in light of the principle of agency
 - We should not be surprised that Jesus is portrayed in the GJohn as doing and saying things that presumably only God can do or say. The proper conclusion in these matters is not to assume that Jesus just is the true God, but rather that Jesus is the authorized agent of God, sent to accomplish God’s work.
 - Commissioned or sent from heaven?
 - Many take this as an either/or dichotomy.
 - Remember, one of the key theological concepts of the Gospel of John is that the human Jesus is the embodiment of God’s personified Logos, the word of the Father. That Logos (the personified utterance and speech) was in the beginning with God, and it has come from God, now embodied in the human Jesus, and so it is proper to say that Jesus has, in this sense, been sent.

- So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. (Isa 55:11)
- Isaiah spoke of a personified word from God, coming from heaven, doing God's desire.
- Certainly, if one was sent from heaven, then they would be commissioned by God, so it isn't an either/or. That would be a false dichotomy.
- The GJohn has not indicated that the son was in the beginning with God, now sent to earth, but rather the word was in the beginning, now sent and embodied—metaphorically speaking—in the human Jesus. This is a critical distinction and an important one to keep in mind as we take seriously what the author of the 4th Gospel is trying to convey to his readers.
- Yes, Jesus is the obedient son. Yes, Jesus is the authorized agent of the Father, empowered to do the works, and speaks the words of God. But Jesus is also the embodiment of the speech of God, the Logos, sent from heaven.

In conclusion

1. The Johannine theme of misunderstanding again is employed by the author to give meaning to Jesus' person, his role as agent, and to his relationship with the one true God. While Jesus spoke of spiritual water just moments ago in the narrative to the Samaritan woman, he now speaks of spiritual food to his followers, the ideal readers of the GJohn.
2. The real food that Jesus is speaking about is not ordinary sustenance, but rather accomplishing the will of God as an authorized agent who performs God's own works. In doing so, Jesus stresses that he is an obedient son, faithfully and accurately doing what God wants him to do. Furthermore, Jesus is an agent who is clearly subordinate to his master. As the agent, Jesus is authorized to say the words of God and perform the deeds of God, effectively making Jesus the mouthpiece and hand of God.
3. Notions of Jesus being sent from God need to be carefully understood in light of what the Gospel of John has said on the topic. The son of God was not in the beginning with the Father. It was God's personified utterance, the Logos, what was in the beginning with God in heaven. This speech was sent and has now been embodied in the human Jesus, and this is the manner of sending that the GJohn wants to impress upon its readers, particularly by making this one of the emphases in the theme of misunderstanding involving food.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode!

Join us next week as we move in John 6 and consider what it means that Jesus is the bread that has come down out of heaven. How does the theme of misunderstanding help make sense of Jesus' words and this cryptic phrase?

Please look forward to our next episode.

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