

# Jesus Doesn't Use IVR!

John 6:1-21 | 7/29/2018

If you've recently tried to call your insurance, credit card, utility or any of the other myriad companies you deal with on a daily basis, your call was no doubt answered by a pleasant but dispassionate voice inviting you to spend the next hour or so trapped in a kind of electronic purgatory. Welcome to IVR or "interactive voice response" — a way for you to feel like you are talking to someone without actually doing so.

Many companies have found that it simply costs too much in terms of time and personnel to spend time chatting with us about our needs. Given the fact that trying to find a human to provide assistance on the other end of the line is a postmodern pipedream, it would be better for these corporations to just give us the real scoop up front. Imagine what that call would sound like:

"Hello and thank you for calling Conglom Corporation. Your call may be monitored for our future entertainment. Your call is very important to us, but not nearly as important as it is to you. If you are calling from a rotary phone, well, that's just sad. "Our automated voice system enables you to answer the prompts by voice instead of pushing buttons, making it seem like you're talking to an actual person. We know that you're not *really* fooled by this, but we're going to do it anyway. We don't have to pay the computer or give it a coffee break, health insurance or vacation, so the whole thing works great for our profit margin. You can scream at it all you want, but it will still be pleasant. "Please listen to the following menu options, and then press or say the number that corresponds with your choice. You will need to have in your hand your Social Security card, names of your entire extended family, 54-digit account number and your eighth-grade locker combination. Even though you enter these now, we'll ask you to repeat them over and over again, because even though you've been sending us truckloads of money every month for our services we still have no idea who you are.

"If at any time you wish to speak to a customer service representative, hang up and call the unemployment office ..."

Some enterprising consumer advocates are fighting back, however. Paul English was recently featured on NPR and several other media outlets for his Web site ([paulenglish.com](http://paulenglish.com)) that gives consumers the special "secret codes" to connect directly with a customer service representative. The Web site lists moreover 100 companies and their codes for getting quickly connected to an actual human.

When we need something badly we want to talk directly to the person who can get it for us rather than following the path of *most* resistance through a maze of menus. Servers and cubicle farms full of harried and underpaid call center reps are no substitute for someone who will really listen and respond.

The classic example of getting what you need when you need it is contained in the story of the feeding of the 5,000. The fact that it occurs in all four gospels is a clue that it was an important story about the ability of Jesus to provide very personal and powerful service. The crucial point here is that *the people had an immediate and pressing need, an immediate Person to address that need, and an immediate response to the need.*

The crowd that gathered by the Sea of Galilee had some definite needs. John 6:2 tells us that many had come for healing, seeking the cure that getting close to Jesus might provide. Not only that, they were likely far from any town or village that could provide them with some fast food options. These people were hungry — physically and spiritually.

Jesus knew this and was about to give his disciples the ultimate lesson in customer service. Seeing the predicament that was fast reaching crisis proportions, Jesus turned to Philip and asked, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" (6: 5). Philip does the math — six months' wages wouldn't be enough to give all these people even a bite of food. You can almost imagine the disciples circulating among this crowd with people recognizing their closeness to Jesus and asking them questions: "Can we see Jesus up close? Got anything to eat? Can you tell me if I can get healed here?" That's why the disciples frequently saw themselves as a cadre of cohorts whose function it was to keep the crowds from getting too close. They kept little children at bay, until Jesus reminded them that "such" are the kingdom of God. They tried to keep the blind and disabled

from getting too close to Jesus as well. They saw themselves as an insulating layer between the people and the Christ — as though Jesus needed their protection.

This story is a story about feeding, but it is, more importantly, a story about access. Will these people have access to Jesus who can — and will — feed them, i.e., respond to their questions and their needs?

Does our congregation understand that Jesus offers access? That there is indeed a menu, but it's a menu of loaves and fishes, a menu in which Jesus says, "Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened unto you."

Sure, Andrew finds a boy with some loaves and fishes, but in the midst of a crowd this big it would have been the modern equivalent of a jumbo jet filled with passengers sharing one packet of airline pretzels. That's a problem that isn't covered in the manual, so the crowd is essentially on hold.

But that's when the real miracle occurs. Imagine that you've called your insurance company in a panic and, lo and behold, a real live person picks up the phone and it's the CEO himself wanting to address your needs. How would that make you feel?

That's essentially what happens. Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish that have been brought to him and invites the people to have a seat. He then begins to act like the host of a Jewish meal, extending the invitation, making his guests comfortable, and then distributing the meal himself (6: 11). That's some serious personal contact! A picnic with Jesus!

That simple act provides an overflowing abundance of food, but also of hope for the crowd. Some scholars believe that Jesus simply pointed out the boy's act of sharing his lunch and that encouraged everyone else to do the same, but such an interpretation misses the real point of the miracle. Jesus had not only given these people food, but in a larger sense he had also given them himself — his touch, his compassion, his word. Later, he would go so far as to allow himself to be broken and his sacrifice distributed as grace for all people in need of hope.

Let's be clear about one thing. This miracle **DOES NOT** prove that Jesus is the Messiah! That becomes indisputable with the Resurrection. But as we saw in our first lesson, Elisha the prophet was pretty good at stretching the food budget. It is more about the compassionate response of Jesus and the access he offers to everyday people than about magical multiplication.

The good news for us is that we don't have to wade through a myriad of messages and corporate minions in order to have access to Jesus himself. We bring our needs directly through prayer, and the CEO of the universe makes the connection with us. As John's story makes clear, he knows what we need even before we do.

The other side to this, though, has to do with our accessibility to others who are in need of a connection with Christ. As churches generate more and more programs and, in some places, get larger and larger, what happens when someone quietly utters a personal need or issues a subtle call for help? Do we give automated, churchy responses or do we say with compassion, "How can I help?" You could be the "real person" that makes all the difference in someone's life.

The truth is that people will flock to those who will listen and respond to them, be it a company or a church or an individual. Companies like Southwest Airlines, Land's End, L.L. Bean, Nordstrom's always have someone there to answer the phone and, as a result, have a huge customer base.

We serve a God who is always there for us. As God's customer service reps here on earth, shouldn't we be every bit as accessible?

*Pastor Keith*