

## SHIFT 4

# from having answers to asking questions

**M**artin B. Copenhaver wrote a book called *Jesus Is the Question*.<sup>9</sup> The premise of this book is simply that Jesus asked questions approximately 10 times more often than He gave answers. His disciple-making efforts were not about having information and answers—although He could have given more than enough answers to all the questions in the whole world—but about asking questions that caused His followers to reconsider their beliefs. What if we became disciples of Jesus who make disciples with Him by valuing tough questions more than having great answers?

Please consider this issue carefully because it is crucial to our engagement with the younger generations who are becoming more and more honest with their deepest questions. I fear that our evangelism efforts in recent years have focused too much on having the right answers and not enough on the actual questions people have. Moreover, I suggest that we have even missed the actual questions we ourselves wrestle with in our own heads and hearts. This is a serious issue that we must change.

Questions—at least the ones that relate to spiritual seeking—are linked to people’s insecurities and emotions. This is true of those who already believe the Gospel of Jesus, as well as those who have yet to believe. We all have questions. Relational disciple making welcomes those questions. Informational discipleship merely addresses those questions intellectually at best and ignores them at worst.

In his recent book, *This Is Our Time*, Trevin Wax suggests that people nowadays interpret truth through their insecurities and emotions.<sup>10</sup> In our efforts to deliver the Good News to the new generations around us, we have not presented the Gospel in ways that acknowledge and respect insecurities and emotions. We have also tended to not create relational presence—enough to even discern a friend’s insecurities and emotional dilemmas. As a result, we have not addressed the questions people are actually asking.

I am concerned that the church today has become really good at giving answers to questions very few people are even asking. We seem to have become really bad at presenting the Gospel in a way that even relates to the circumstances and dilemmas people face.

Consider the examples of Jesus’ interaction with Nicodemus in John 3 and the woman at the well in John 4. Nicodemus was insecure about what his fellow religious leaders would think if they knew he wanted to learn from Jesus. So he went to Jesus at night. Nicodemus emotionally struggled to believe how the unseen God would actually make all things new again. As a result, Jesus asked him questions to help him wrestle with the notion of being born again.

The woman at the well was insecure about what her fellow townspeople thought of her in general, so she came to the well during off times of the day. She struggled to believe how Jerusalem’s God could ever love her, especially when Jerusalem’s people didn’t love her. As a result, Jesus asked her questions to help her wrestle with

the notion that God loved her no matter where she lived or who lived with her.

My friends with La Chapelle in Montreal, Quebec, are seeing the effectiveness of asking questions for disciple making through first-hand experience. The result is that they have had the privilege of baptizing hundreds of 20- and 30-somethings since their launch in April 2013 LaChapelle.me in the midst of a culture missiologists describe as the most lost city in North America.

These friends of mine have discovered that actually becoming friends with their neighbors in such a way that they can discern Montreal inhabitants' actual questions as they burn in the hearts and minds has allowed them the opportunity to make disciples who make disciples. This happens relationally by translating the Gospel into the core insecurities and emotional dilemmas of those in their city who have yet to believe. Simply put, they quit trying to give answers and started praying for wisdom to hear the questions being asked.

How can you and I do this? Well, there's no silver bullet, but I suggest four practices to help you make this shift as you relationally engage with those who welcome you into their lives:

### **1. Listen attentively for people's actual questions.**

Someone may be beating up their self, ashamed of a secret habit that has enslaved them for years. Or they may have been physically or sexually abused as a child. They may even feel overwhelmingly inadequate. For others, a close friend may have been betrayed them. Still others may be struggling in their marriage. You'll find that parents are exhausted and feel like they never hear from God when they cry out to Him. Someone may wonder how the church can have so

many divisions and denominations and still assert that their way has reconciled us as one with God. I could go on and on, but remember that everyone has a unique question. Listen for it.

## **2. Value hearing someone's personal story rather than sharing your own.**

It's good to be able to tell your own story, but if we don't become authentically curious about someone else's story and listen to it attentively, how will we know how to translate the Gospel for them? I have personally seen and heard multiple accounts of how God's Spirit enlightened someone to discover the answers for which they were searching because a believing friend simply took the time to understand their story.

So ask the Lord to help you become good at sincerely asking questions in order to learn the details of someone's life. If someone welcomes you as a friend, be a friend who values where they've been and who they are becoming more than where you've been and who you're becoming. Your turn to share will come, and you will likely find the connection points between your story and theirs, but learn to value their story above yours.

## **3. Love graciously, allowing people plenty of time and space to belong before they ever believe.**

Don't let your disciple-making efforts be halted because you are trying to change someone's behavior (that's not your job anyway). You can, however, cultivate a loving friendship where someone has plenty of time and space to be changed by Jesus. That's what He does: He makes all things new.

“Believe, belong, become” was the mantra for many churches in the latter part of the twentieth century. I don’t think we intended this, but I fear we allowed our “discipleship” efforts to create environments in which an unbeliever has to *believe* before they can ever *become*—and especially before they can feel like they belong. There are certainly exceptions, but I would suggest that this is all too often the case for most local churches. Jesus did not make disciples like this. His first followers were not “believers” like we think of them today. People criticized Him for hanging with such sinners as Matthew, for example (Matt. 9:9-13), but Matthew could feel like he belonged with Jesus long before he ever believed.

In Jesus’ style of discipleship, relational disciple making is not limited to those who already believe, nor is it limited to those who already know how to act. Gracious, loving, belonging, welcoming friendships make this type of relationship possible. The space of grace and the environment of kindness lead to repentance (see Romans 2).

#### **4. Let people see your questions, insecurities, and even selfishness, too.**

Last thing I suggest for this shift to asking questions instead of having the answers is to be honest with yourself about your own insecurities and questions. Never stop reminding yourself of the Gospel of Jesus and the Truth it declares about your own identity, security, and purpose. Let other people see your emotional struggles because acting like we have all the answers cripples our disciple-making efforts. Listen to the questions people actually ask because this posture brings friendships to life and moves us from informational discipleship to relational disciple making.

So we must look for those who welcome us into their lives and listen well to the actual questions they are asking. This is crucial for relational disciple making to thrive. Abundant life happens when we make disciples with Jesus. Now for the final shift, let's consider the everyday rhythms of the disciple-making life. That is, what do we do practically speaking with Jesus and with those we invite along?