IF JESUS ASKED A LOT OF QUESTIONS, SHOULD CHRISTIANS?: HOW JESUS'S RHETORIC INFORMS OUR DISCIPLESHIP PRACTICES

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IF JESUS ASKED A LOT OF QUESTIONS: SHOULD CHRISTIANS?:
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the rhetorical impact of Jesus's use of question-asking on his audience, particularly in the context of discipleship as a process of identity formation. By analyzing the way Jesus employed questions to shape his followers into deeper worshippers, I argue that modern discipleship should model this approach. Through a combination of biblical analysis and theoretical research, I demonstrate that Jesus's questions were not merely teaching tools but pivotal in guiding individuals toward transformative spiritual growth. To further explore this concept, I designed an experimental project that assessed the effect of open-ended questions on participants' identities in relation to God, themselves, and others. The results of the experiment showed measurable improvements in participants' understanding and engagement with these key areas. In conclusion, I advocate for churches to embrace and reward curiosity, emphasizing the need for ministries to incorporate more open-ended, thought-provoking questions into their practices for fostering deeper spiritual development.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

ASK BETTER QUESTIONS: QUESTION ASKING AND ANSWERING IN THE DISCIPLESHIP PROCESS FORMS IDENTITIES

Statement of Ministry Issue

On a summer road trip with two parishioners, I asked them a question I have asked churchgoers through the years: "What is discipleship?" Usually, the responses include iterations of "It's a program on Wednesday nights" or "when one person mentors another like Barnabas did for Paul who did for Timothy." Sometimes I hear "It's the ability to read your Bible and pray" or "It's for super-duper Christians." My car trip companions—both of whom have been in churches from their diaper days—responded in a similar same vein. While programs, mentorship, and spiritual disciplines play a part in the discipleship process, they fall short of fully defining this term that Jesus commissions all (not just the brawny believers) of his followers to obey. The two women accompanying me had considerable biblical and theological knowledge and have been crawling and walking through pews for a lifetime. Why, then, are their definitions of discipleship so anemic—like most others? I blame theologians like me. "Go and make disciples" remains the clarion call of Christians even after two millennia. Maybe we should be clearer on what this means and then discuss effective ways of fulfilling that calling. This thesis will attempt to do just that.

While the emphasis of this thesis will focus on question-asking as a rhetorical strategy for discipleship, we must first define our terms. Without a shared understanding of the definitions, we would be lost. I will argue discipleship is identity formation. The process of discipleship asks and answers, "Who is God?," "Who am I?," "Who are others?," and "How do these identities

relate?" Discipleship is growing in the knowledge of the Trinity's identity while simultaneously growing in the knowledge of self and neighbor. Undergirding this knowledge is the assumption that right knowledge will result in greater love. When one truly beholds God, love results.

If discipleship is identity formation, how do we go about forming identities? Jesus, the model discipler, shows the way. When examining how Jesus discipled his followers, we see several methods employed: didactic teaching, demonstration of miracles, leading by example, and question-asking to name a few. Most of this thesis will focus on Jesus's use of question-asking as a tactic for identity formation. We aim to answer a simple hypothesis: If Jesus asked a lot of questions, should we? I think so. After defining our terms, discussing the rhetorical impact of question-asking, and looking at Jesus's example as a question asker, we will then discuss the results of a project designed to test the effectiveness of question-asking on identity formation. Participants in the project simply ask and answer open-ended, identity-forming questions. Looking at the results we demonstrate how asking questions—with no attendant teaching about the Bible or theology—resulted in greater clarity about God, the individual, and the individual's conception of their neighbor. The final section of this thesis will consider theological conclusions derived from the research.

Ministry Context

In the fall of 2017, I walked on a stage in a rented room of a church in Oak Cliff, Dallas, Texas and uttered the words, "If nobody has told you today that they love you, we do. But, way more importantly, God does." A church was born, and I was now their Resident Theologian. St Jude Oak Cliff started as a church plant out of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). The lead pastor, Martin Ban, and our lead elder, John Hawkins, came together to plant a church that

focused on caring for the poor and teaching theology. Instead of the materially poor, God sent us the poor in Spirit.

In our first year, the PCA gave us an ultimatum: either leave the PCA or stop having a woman teach from the stage on Sunday mornings. We opted to leave and expanded opportunities for women within St Jude. After leaving the denomination, we considered joining others that both allow women to preach/administer the sacraments and also encourage them to do so. In the end, we decided to remain an independent church. But while we left the PCA, we brought some of their traditions with us. For example, those who participate in the worship service wear stoles; we have a more liturgical order of worship; and we limited the offices to elder and minister of Word and Sacrament. Due to the departure from the PCA, though, we implemented some changes. A woman preached, a woman led sacraments, and that woman wore Nikes while doing so. As one person quipped, “St Jude is either the highest low church, or the lowest high church.” We liked that mixture.

In 2019, a consultant guided us on a listening tour of our church which brought us data to support what we sensed among our body. We were the church for spiritual refugees. People came to St Jude limping from church hurt, mid- or post-deconstruction, and giving a last-ditch effort to the whole church enterprise. Over 60 percent of our congregants stated, “If St Jude did not exist, we would not attend church at all.” The leadership recognized the high stakes of caring for such a vulnerable group of people. To strategically care for the wounded, our church focused on justice, counseling-informed preaching, and theological classes.

As the Resident Theologian, I had the privilege of designing, teaching, and leading all our theology courses. We called them “TAP” which stood for “Theology Automatic for the People." This was an homage to an REM album titled “Automatic for the People” which they named after

a soul-food restaurant called Weaver D's in Athens, Georgia. Dexter Weaver, the owner, came up with the slogan.[1] We wanted theology to be the same—accessible for the masses.

Starting with a Trinity class in a roofing company's office, I launched what would be seven years of weekly theology and Bible study courses. St Jude hosted them at that roofing company; in a Salvation Army cafeteria; in the basement of an old Dixie Cup factory; my living room; Martin's living room; an old dentist's office that we refurbished into a gathering space; and in an elder's living room. I covered the gamut of topics. I taught courses on the Trinity, Essentials of the Faith, Justice, 1 Timothy, Advent, Amos, Attributes of God, Meta-narrative of the Bible, Bible Study Methodology, Role of Women, Gospel in the Margins, Hebrews, Jesus's Biography, Jude, Romans, Sermon on the Mount, Textual Criticism, and Church History. Once during a class on how the first-century churches operated, I put on a Roman Centurion costume and gave roles to my students like "Gentile Father," "House Slave," and "Recent Jewish Convert." In full Roman garb I read a letter I had crafted from miscellaneous writings of Paul. I stopped intermittently to ask how each person, in character, felt about what I just said. That evening garnered rave reviews. From theology, to Bible, to history, St Jude's members had ample opportunity to receive didactic teaching on Christian educational topics.

The class sizes oscillated between 10–60 people, included both men and women, and ranged in ages from 21–85. Participants sometimes came with formal theological training, and others attended without any prior theological or biblical knowledge. Most participants called St Jude their home church, but regularly people from across the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex joined

[1]Hillary Canavan, "Athens, GA Restaurant Behind R.E.M.'s 'Automatic for the People' to Close - Eater," accessed January 25, 2025, https://www.eater.com/2013/11/5/6336657/athens-ga-restaurant-behind-r-e-m-s-automatic-for-the-people-to-close.

our courses. Once we even had two women who commuted from Decatur, Texas each week to attend a "How to Study the Bible Course" with fresh farm eggs and a bundt cake in tow.

One of the unique features of my particular style of teaching came at the end of every course. I asked students to prepare a final project they could present in the last week as a theological adult show-and-tell. The guidelines were simple: create anything you want that allows you to respond worshipfully to what you are learning. I asked my students, "What is God teaching you?" And "How can you create something in response to what you are learning?" Final projects gave students a chance to meditate upon and respond to what God taught them through the courses. Students cooked recipes, wrote poems, illustrated books, cross-stitched pillows, made mixed-media art, wrote songs, and planted flowers. While most students in formal education dread final projects, my theological students looked forward to a chance to show part of their own personality and what God was doing in and through them. Some of my favorite items in my home are final projects my students gifted to me after the courses finished.

In addition to final projects, each class time included group discussions and interactive teaching. Most classes lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and I lectured for less than 40 minutes. The rest of the time students either talked in groups, had moments of writing reflections, or engaged in Q&A with me. Every single class starts with me asking the same question: "What is the goal of all Christian instruction?" The class responds with "Worship." Following this antiphonal moment, every class included a worshipful reflection so that the evening started with pausing and preparing ourselves to worship, not just learn. During the first week of any new class I emphasized that all questions were welcomed throughout the class time. I have a personal ministry philosophy that "curiosity should be rewarded" and often said this phrase to my students.

In summary, these theological classes varied greatly in topic and created opportunities for folks of all different backgrounds to come together and interact with each other and with me. With the final project expectations, students tended to think about the content outside of the class time. In other words, St Jude's members enjoyed robust theological education through experiential classroom teaching.

I am exceedingly proud of what my students produced in their final projects. Every semester when I saw what God had produced in my students through our theological show-and-tell, I had to humbly acknowledge that while I might have prepared Power-points and lectures and thought strategically about good questions for interactive time, the fruit of their study far exceeded anything I might have presented to them. God taught them deeper things than I had. If discipleship leads to better identity formation, these courses created opportunities for that holy work to take place.

When a member of the RightNow Media staff heard about my courses and how I structured my class time, she invited me to speak at RightNow's church leaders conference in Dallas, Texas in 2022. I wanted to show other churches how they might implement these same tactics into their theological and biblical courses. When forced to distill what makes a great course, I highlighted three elements: final projects, interactive open-ended questions, and a facilitator that rewards curiosity. While I received overwhelmingly positive feedback from my breakout session, many ministers came forward and expressed that they struggled to imagine how they could create a classroom with this much participation because of the size of their churches. Clearly, small churches could emulate my classroom strategy, but large churches—restrained by the size of rooms and number of participants—would need a different methodology.

Prior to my post at St Jude, I worked for a mega-church in Dallas. I empathize with ministers who feel the constraints of the size prevent them from having more intimate moments in their classes. How does someone get five hundred people into a room, teach them the Bible, and impact their lives? I spent seven years asking this question and fell into the pattern most large churches do: write your own curriculum, recruit and train small-group leaders, develop a team of teachers that exegetes the text, and hope small-group time—where leaders ask questions from the curriculum—will lead to life transformation. And it does. I watched people set free by the gospel every semester. However, I would humbly argue that it works because God is gracious, not because it is the most effective way to disciple people.

After seven years in my mega-church and then seven years in my mini-church, I have seen the immense fruit that comes from intentional time where students get to engage their imaginations, ask their questions in real time, and hear repeatedly, "What a great question!" Lest you think I'm critiquing the mega-church model, I want to be clear: I aim to help rather than criticize. If the goal of discipleship is identity formation, then parishioners need both to think well about the Scriptures and also how that knowledge shapes their understanding of God, themselves, and others.

Besides, we have something other than mega-church models to blame. We get to blame Aristotle. It is time to air some grievances against Alexander the Great's tutor. When Aristotle penned *Interpretation*, I highly doubt he imagined it would impact 2,300 years of education in the Western world. Yet, here we are. Because of Aristotle, our education system suffers under the Declarative Fallacy which says declarative statements are enough to make a valid argument.[2] Learners sit through lectures built upon propositional statements, whether in school or Sunday

[2] Nuel Belnap, "Declaratives Are Not Enough," *Philosophical Studies* 59, no. 1 (1990): 1.

school. One philosopher begs his colleagues to reconsider as he titles his essay with, ironically, a declarative sentence: Declaratives Are Not Enough.[3] Should he not have named it, "Are declaratives enough?" Either way, he goes on to persuasively argue that systematic theorists should stop ignoring interrogatives and imperatives and give them equal weight in any important study of language. Of course, he is pushing against a line echoed by "Boethius (c. 480–c. 525), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and many other modern philosophers that 'only propositions have truth value.'"[4] Where the philosophers go, so does the education system and then the churches follow. Aristotle's *Interpretation* kills questions.[5]

We can see the strange fruit of anti-question environments in very young children. Researchers discovered that as children grow and mature, they ask fewer questions. From age 2–5 children ask approximately 40,000 questions to their parents.[6] Once they get to preschool the questions begin to decrease, and when they get to the point where they can read, the frequency in which they ask questions plummets.[7] Some might argue that questions are no longer necessary because the student can find the information on their own; however, the data show that students who ask fewer questions in school are less engaged in general.[8] Fewer questions equals less interest. While this data should encourage school teachers to develop more opportunities to ask questions and reward curiosity, I am far more concerned with what pastors, parents, and small-

[3] Belnap, "Declaratives Are Not Enough," 1–30.

[4] Estes, *The Questions of Jesus in John*, 5.

[5] Admittedly, Aristotle should not shoulder the entire blame for the lack of questions in our schools and places or worship. But he makes a better straw man than mega-Churches who I want to reach.

[6] Warren Berger, *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 40.

[7] Berger, *A More Beautiful Question*, 44.

[8] Berger, *A More Beautiful Question*, 45.

group leaders do with this data. If the goal is greater engagement, we need to create cultures of curiosity. After all, if Jesus asked a lot of questions, shouldn't Christians do the same? Should we look more like Aristotle or the Alpha and Omega?

Aristotle makes a fun target, but he shoulders more blame for schools than churches. For the ecclesial setting, we have ourselves to blame. When I was twenty-two years old and fresh out of college, I signed up for a yearlong program at a residential care facility for troubled teens. During the day while the teens attended school, the "bigs" as they called us, sat in theological courses taught by local pastors. During a lesson on theodicy, I asked one leader about how to square the immense suffering in the world with the knowledge that God could stop it and chooses to allow it. The answer I received felt shallow and insincere. The gist of the answer was "God is good, you have to trust."

So, I asked another question, saying that answer felt unsatisfactory. This time the response I received came from a red-faced, beady-eyed, sixty-year-old man who ended my questions by screaming at me that if he couldn't ask God why his sister was brutally raped repeatedly by their family member why I thought I had the right to ask theoretical questions. I stared at him while he shook, and the room stayed silent for an extended period. No one dared ask another question the rest of our time with that man. I remember this moment vividly because I was screamed at, but also because I never got the answer to my question. I really cared about the problem of evil and went to seminary to find the answer. This man assumed my question was theoretical, but questions rarely are. Seasoned pastors know that when a person asks about death, or sexuality, or evil or any number of difficult topics it is because the person is either wrestling with something or they love someone who is. A simple, "Why do you ask?" goes a long way.

I know my experience, while painful, is not unique. Throughout my fifteen years of pastoral ministry, I have heard too many stories of people's questions being met with hostility, dismissiveness, or rebuke for lack of faith. Too many leaders in churches punish rather than reward curiosity. In a book about church deconstruction by the esteemed New Testament scholar Scot McKnight and his pastor friend Tommy Phillips the authors discuss the suspicion too many church leaders express when met with people rethinking and asking questions. Way too many people with legitimate questions about Scripture, theology, or life have been taught that the "heart is desperately wicked and deceitful, always desiring the wrong thing (except what some authority decides you should want) . . . you can't trust yourself or your questions, therefore trusting your own gut and asking questions must be deconstructing."[9]

Authoritative and insecure clergy rage against the trend of deconstruction without an ounce of self-examination that might lead to the realization that their curiosity-killing methods and teaching pushes people out of the pews. These leaders rage against deconstruction while the Nathans around them plead with them to see "they are that man." Too many wounded parishioners leave the church for good for daring to ask important questions. We must do better. The project I designed aims primarily to positively form a person's identity. Secondarily, and maybe even paramount to the first goal, I aim to foster a culture of curiosity and safer exploration of life's big questions.

My ministry context allowed me to ethically experiment upon my devout students. As mentioned, I have taught everything under the sun to them. They could pass plenty of first-year seminary courses with their current knowledge from our time together. Ask one of my students to

[9] Scot McKnight and Thomas Preson Phillips, *Invisible Jesus: A Book about Leaving the Church and Looking for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024), 29.

define the Trinity, and you will hear "God is eternally three persons, one essence." This context allowed me to test a simple theory. If I taught nothing, but instead gave them questions to ask and answer with a partner on their own, would this result in a net positive in their relationship with God, themselves, and others? Strip away the teaching, the final projects, the razzle dazzle that I like to think I bring to the classroom, and only ask intentional, open-ended, deeply personal, well-crafted questions. Does doing so positively shape a Christian's identity? If it does, then the questions I created in this experiment could be a resource in the toolbox of any minister regardless of the size of their ministry. And, if it does, then by providing questions, we might even create a culture within our ministries that welcomes even more questions. Whether in a mega-church, mini-church, or minivan, anyone who wants to disciple others well could use this experiment as a guide to help them in that endeavor.

If discipleship is identity formation, and if asking questions can positively shape our understanding of God's identity, our self-identity, and our neighbor's identity, then the aim of this thesis is to create a resource for ministers, moms, aunts, professors, small group leaders, and everyone who has ever been asked, "Will you disciple me?" I want to help the church. I want to help ministers. I want to help those who genuinely want to care for others. And I want to help those who have felt dismissed, belittled, or punished for daring to ask questions. This experiment has its roots in St Jude, its branches are intended for any would-be discipler or for those who want their curiosity rewarded.

Jesus asks a lot of questions, and if we follow his lead, we should not be surprised if good fruit and greater love results from modeling our discipleship practices after him. In the next few chapters, I will define discipleship as identity formation and then look at Jesus's use of question-asking as he discipled others. Next, I will sketch the design of the project and the results of the

experiment. Finally, I will suggest theological reflections and suggestions for those hoping to implement more questions into their ministry contexts.

CHAPTER 2:

DISCIPLESHIP AS IDENTITY FORMATION: DEFINING OUR TERMS AND MAKING JESUS OUR MODEL

Any time I want to know what evangelical pop-culture thinks of something, I allow the SEO optimization at Google give me the answers. After searching "How do we make disciples?" in my Google chrome browser, the first page offers articles from *Ligonier Ministries*, *Desiring God*, and *Disciple First*.[10] If you click on *Desiring God*, the article beautifully articulates how Jesus made disciples. He called men (exclusively men in this article) to worship him and then emulate his life. However, when the article turns to discussing how Christians today should disciple, it moves into mentorship jargon. The author summarizes with, "*Disciple-making*, in this context, is the process in which a stable, mature believer invests himself, for a particular period of time, in one or a few younger believers, in order to help their growth in the faith — including helping them also to invest in others who will invest in others."[11] The popular notion that discipleship is akin to Barnabas mentoring Paul who mentors Timothy undergirds this methodology.

Clicking on *Ligonier* offers a more Scripture-based model of discipleship. While stating "a learner is a listener and a practitioner" the article narrowly defines the source of information for the learner: the Bible.[12] While teaching the Bible certainly plays a part in the discipleship

[10] Apparently egalitarian ministries need to ramp up their SEO efforts as all three of these populating articles come from complementarian institutions.

[11] David Mathis, "How Did Jesus 'Make Disciples'?," *Desiring God* (blog), June 2, 2022, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-did-jesus-make-disciples.

[12] Dave Eby, "Make Disciples," Ligonier Ministries, accessed January 26, 2025, https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/make-disciples. Dave posits, "Disciples are made through the ministry of the Word entrusted to the church, including preaching, teaching, evangelism, and counseling."

process, to summarize the entirety of Christoformity as knowing writ robs Jesus while paying Moses, Paul, and Peter. The *Disciple First* fellas offer a programmatic approach by sketching discipleship as 1) selecting the right person; 2) picking the right tool (tools here refer to discipleship curriculums from Navigators, Campus Crusade, and CBMC); 3) move in stages, not too much in the beginning; 4) take the man with you (perhaps to sporting events) and finally; 5) expose the man to evangelistic opportunities.[13] For *Disciple First,* discipleship happens through teaching a curriculum and emulation of the discipler. While I do not wish to overly critique these articles, as all three include very insightful and thoughtful ways to help others grow in their faith journeys, observation of some omissions reveals the need to help ministers add identity formation to their definition of "make disciples."

Interestingly, none of the articles mention baptizing as part of the discipleship process.[14] Given the close proximity of "baptizing" and "teaching" to "make disciples" in the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20), one wonders why all three articles heavily emphasize teaching but neglect baptizing. As we will argue later, baptizing was a means of identity formation and its omission here is curious. Furthermore, the *Desiring God* articles does not mention love at all, and the *Desiring First* article says we should love others far from God. *Ligonier* mentions love repeatedly as a way to emulate Christ and should be commended for this.

If asked to infer from their articles the assumed goal of discipleship, the answers would include Scripture exegesis and missional behavior. None mention the type of people discipleship-making should produce. If all a person had was the first page of Google, the goal of discipleship

[13] Craig Etheredge, "How Can You Effectively Make Disciples," June 4, 2024, https://disciplefirst.com/how-can-you-effectively-make-disciples/.

[14] The *Desiring God* article mentions baptizing as a way to show the emphasis upon Jesus as the centrality of our faith, but does not encourage or instruct those who are making disciples to baptize others.

would somewhat include looking like Christ, but the emphasis would fall upon mentorship, Scripture reading, and evangelism. And no one would get baptized.

Again, I do not want to set these three articles and ministries up as punching bags. Much of their content deserves commendation. However, their priority in the Google search means they represent a fairly accurate picture of discipleship in American, evangelical churches. While their context approximates discipleship, it misses a key component: identity formation. Discipleship is about more than following Christ; it includes who we become. In what follows I will briefly define identity and then discuss what Jesus meant when he spoke those famous words at the Great Commission—words Matthew later recorded. By looking narrowly at the Gospel of Matthew, we will conclude that discipleship is following Christ and forming people into greater Christlikeness. As we will see, this formation impacts the way we view God, ourselves, and our membership within the community of God's people. Discipleship impacts more than what we do; rather, it primarily impacts who and whose we are, which then results in changed behaviors. Changed identities change conduct.

Defining Identity

What is identity? To exhaustively answer this question, I would need an entire sociology degree and probably a counseling degree, as well. Instead, the definition presented here relies on broad sketches, though accurate, to move the argument in this thesis along. One writer defines human identity as "a working hypothesis of the self…a process in which individuals draw on both internal and external cultural resources for their self-understanding and self-expression."[15]

[15] Michael D. O'Neil, "The Role of Baptism in Christian Identity Formation," *Religions* 15, no. 4 (2024): 459.

Identity then answers, "Who am I?" and "How am I supposed to act?" With this component of acting, "identity formation has a moral content and should in principle be open to moral evaluation."[16] A person's individual identity impacts how she behaves in the world and therefore needs shaping. Another approach to identity emphasizes the way a person understands themselves in a group setting known as Social Identity Theory. This theory states, "social identity is defined as 'the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership.'"[17] In other words, our identity includes who we are amongst others, and that carries with it emotional significance to us. It matters deeply not only who I am, but who am I as a member of different groups. James Clear, in his book on forming habits that will stick, dedicates an entire chapter to how family and friends impact our behaviors. He summarizes this chapter by stating, "The culture we live in determines which behaviors are attractive to us. We tend to adopt habits that are praised and approved of by our culture because we have a strong desire to fit in and belong to the tribe."[18] The age-old adage, "Tell me who your friends are, and I will tell you who you are" holds true in the Social Identity Theory.

These two slightly different definitions of identity beg the question: Is identity about who I am individually or about who I am corporately? Yes. It turns out the equal ultimacy of the one and many applies to our self-identity. If one were to ask a trinitarian scholar what mattered more, Jesus's distinction as the Son of God or his unity as the member of the Trinity, he hopefully would hear "both." Admittedly, if a person who originates from cultures that over-emphasize

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[16] O'Neil, "The Role of Baptism in Christian Identity Formation," 459.

[17] Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1988), 7.

[18] James Clear, *Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results* (New York: Avery, 2018), 122.

group settings was asked who she is, you might hear more group-related definitions. And, the opposite, of course, would be true from the pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps influenced person. In her book on the role of community in church transformation, Boyung Lee observes, "Koreans, like many African, Hispanic, Native, and other Asian American cultures, view the person as a part of a whole. In contrast, most European cultures person independent and autonomous."[19] Despite these differences of emphasis, researchers would later note in an article comparing Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory, combining the strengths of these two theories of identity formation might lead to a better understanding of individuals.[20] If God made humanity in the image of the Triune who eternally exists as three persons and one essence, then we should not be surprised to find that one understands herself through her individuality *and* place within a community.[21] What is my identity? It is how you view yourself and how you view yourself as one of the group.

As Christians though, another portion of our identity permeates who I am individually and who I am as a member of the community. We wrestle with what it means to be the image of God (Gen 1:27). Being the *imago Dei* means more than simply having godlike capabilities such

[19] Boyung Lee, *Transforming Congregations through Community: Faith Formation from the Seminary to the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 3.

[20] Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White, "A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (1995): 255–69, https://doi.org/10.2307/2787127.

[21] Admittedly, this oversimplifies how multiple identities compete in our understanding self. For example, how does my identity as an American impact my understanding of self will matter if the Summer Olympics are taking place or if I am watching an inauguration. And that "American" identity will sometimes bring consonance or dissonance against my other group identities. For a thorough discussion of "social identity complexity" which states that our various group identities overlap and interplay see Sonia Roccas and Marilynn B. Brewer, "Social Identity Complexity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6 (2002): 88–106.

as reasoning and storytelling that German Shepherds lack.[22] Rather, "we need to view the *imago Dei* as a declaration that God intended to create human persons to be the physical means through which he would manifest his own divine presence in the world."[23] God bless the middle school pastors who must guide pre-pubescent teens through acne, cliques, and manifesting an infinite God in third period English class. However, the task of such leaders is nothing short of what I've described. This means to truly know ourselves, we must know God. Otherwise we misunderstand our role as the image of God. In his first chapter of his giant *Institutes*, John Calvin captures this sentiment well as he wrote:

> Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in who he "lives and moves" [Acts 17:28]. For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God. Then, by these benefits shed like dew from heaven upon us, we are led as by rivulets to the spring itself.[24]

To know oneself, one must know God, but the exploration can start with God or the mirror. With all due respect to Calvin, I would add to his thesis that the knowledge of others also allows us to more fully know God and self. Despite the omission, Calvin rightly acknowledges that knowledge of God and self must hold hands as they are inextricably linked through the *imago Dei*.

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[22] I use "being" here strategically. As Carmen Imes reminds us, "God's image may lead us to certain actions, "image" is not something we do, but who we are." Carmen Joy Imes, *Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters* (Melton: InterVarsity, 2023), 6.

[23] Marc Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 109.

[24] Jean Calvin and Jean, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 35-36.

If we combine the social theories of identity and theological understanding of humanity's blueprint, then we can surmise that identity is *broadly a person's ongoing understanding of God, self, and others.* Furthermore, since identity is complex and static, it means the understanding of God, oneself, and the other must simultaneously coalesce into a person's total identity. More simply, identity formation is asking and answering: Who is God?, Who am I?, Who are others?, And, how do these realities relate? As we dive into the definition of discipleship, we will see that discipleship is in fact doing the same thing. It is helping us learn about God, ourselves, and others. That knowledge and implementing how to relate and act according to that knowledge results in greater conformity to Christ. Afterall, if you learn that God is love, and you learn you are made in the image of God, does that not mean you will then learn you must also spend your life dedicated to self-donating, loving relationships as God has done? Discipleship forms us, and part of that formation is forming our identity. When Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples, he in part commands them to shape others' identities. However, as we have already noted, "making disciples" conjures various meanings, so I must now assert my definition of discipleship.

Defining Discipleship

Matthew records Jesus's words in the Great Commission—"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."[25] The original audience would already have been familiar with the term "make disciples" (a singular word in the Greek). Discipleship was not unique or

[25] Matt 28:19-20, CSB.

even original to the Christian movement. Prior to the first century, religious, philosophical, and political leaders all had followers committed to their causes, teachings, and beliefs. The most commonly used word to refer to these acolytes was "disciple" (*μαθητής*).[26] In fact the idea of a disciple was so prominent in the Greek-speaking world, philosophers debated *how* discipleship should take place. In Demosthenes *Against Lacritus* the author expresses frustration at Lacritus's defrauding others of a loan he took. As Demosthenes makes his case against the teacher, he states that Lacritus thinks he is clever enough and trusts in his speech enough to help him fool the judge and jury. Demosthenes also takes aim at Lacritus's practice of taking money from pupils and teaching them self-professed knowledge.[27] Lacritus sounds sheisty, but notice the name given to his pupils is that of "disciple" (*μαθητής*). Socrates and Plato take issue with the way Sophists go about discipling others and claim that a better way is to draw out innate knowledge rather than fill up with one's own.[28] One wonders if Plato and Socrates spent enough time around toddlers, but regardless, the term for their students is also "disciple" (*μαθητής*).

Hippocrates, famous for his oath, rejected the idea of taking money but committed "By precept, lecture, and every other mode of instruction, I will impart a knowledge of the Art to my

[26] *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, 2nd ed, Joel B. Green, ed., The IVP Bible Dictionary Series (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013). s.v. "Disciple."

[27] Demosthenes, *Against Lacritus,* 35.40.10-41.1-7. (page 305) "That is part of this rascally sophist, who should be made to suffer for it. This fellow Lacritus, men of the jury, has not come into court relying on the justice of his case, but realizing perfectly what he and his brothers have done in the matter of this loan; and because he considers that he is clever and will easily provide arguments to defend evil practices, he thinks he will lead you astray just as he pleases. For it is precisely in these matters that *he professes himself to be clever, and he asks money, and collects pupils, promising to instruct them in these very things"* (emphasis mine).

[28] Plato, *Sophists*, 233.B.6-C.6. As Theaetetus in talking to his interlocutor, he clearly takes aim at Demosthenes picture of Lacritus' instruction when he states, "In the way in which they are able to make young men think that they themselves are in all matters the wisest of men. For it is clear that if they neither disputed correctly nor seemed to the young men to do so, or again if they did seem to dispute rightly but were not considered wiser on that account, nobody, to quote from you, would care to pay them money to become their pupil in these subjects."

own sons, and those of my teachers, and to disciples."[29] By the time of Jesus, in the Greek speaking world the practice of having disciples as people to whom a person could pass down knowledge—innate or otherwise—was the dominating definition of the term.

Once Jesus starts collecting his own disciples, the term takes on another nuance: adherent. Rather than simply describing teacher-student relationship, "disciple" also could be akin to "follower" or "devotee." In his Discourse on Homer and Socrates, Dio Chrysostom describes the master-disciple relationship in stronger terms than simply informational transaction. He writes, "you make it evident that on general grounds you are an *admirer* of Socrates and also that you are *filled with wonder* at the man as revealed in his words, you can tell me of which among the sages he was a pupil (*μαθητής*)" (emphasis mine).[30] One wonders why the Loeb translation uses "pupil" rather than a stronger word given the language of "admire" and "filled with wonder." Either way, Dio Chrysostom captures some of the stronger bonds between the master-disciple relationship in the Hellenized world. Interestingly, he continues in his discourse to argue that Socrates was in fact a disciple of Homer, though the two men could have never met. To make his case, Dio Chrysostom points to the similarities between the two men as evidence that Homer, though long dead by the time of Socrates, discipled him from the grave.

For Dio Chrysostom, imitation correlates to discipleship. If it walks, talks, and quacks like a duck, it was probably discipled by a duck. In this understanding, discipleship "assumed the development of a sustained commitment of the disciple to the master and to the master's particular teaching or mission and the relationship extended to imitation of the conduct of the

[29] *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels,* s.v. "Disciple."

[30] Dio Chrysostom, *Hom,* 1.1-2.

master as it impacted the personal life of the disciple."[31] Thus, discipleship by the time of Jesus included passing along information, remaining devoted to the discipler, and inevitably imitating of the exemplar.

In addition to the Greco-Roman Gentile world, the idea of having disciples had also permeated the Hellenized Jewish world. Mark tells us in his Gospel that the Pharisees had disciples (Mark 2:18). Interestingly, the Pharisees are said to have disciples despite the fact that they represented a religious-political party. This would be akin to calling those who vote for Democrats as "disciples of the Democrats" instead of "Democrat," as is typical. However, such usage reveals the term might be used in a "non-technical sense of 'followers,' referring to those sympathetic to Pharisaic beliefs."[32]

During a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees about the healing of a blind man, the blind man asks the Pharisees if they want to become Jesus's disciples. The Pharisees respond indignantly with "We are Moses' disciples!" (John 9:24-29). Keener believes this retort echoes genuine Pharisaic tradition, as later rabbis could speak of ultimately receiving revelation from Moses on Sinai.[33] In a similar vein Philo says in his work *Cherubim* that:

> having been initiated in the great mysteries by Moses, the friend of God, nevertheless, when subsequently I beheld Jeremiah the prophet, and learnt that he was not only initiated into the sacred mysteries, but was also a competent hierophant or expounder of them, did not hesitate to become his pupil.[34]

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[31] *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels,* s.v. "Disciple."

[32] Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 138.

[33] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 791.

[34] Philo, *Cherubim*, 49, in Philo and Charles Duke Yonge, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, New Edition (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002). 85.

This word rendered "pupil" here is the same word Matthew uses for disciple (*μαθητής*). While the Pharisees directly claimed to be disciples of Moses, Philo goes through the proxy of Jeremiah the prophet. Yet, the Jewish tradition, like the Hellenized Gentile one, allowed for posthumous discipleship. In addition to the Pharisees, John the Baptist had disciples (John 1:35–37). Though, John, playing the part of the frontrunner well, tells his disciples they should follow Jesus instead. One wonders if those disciples wore camel-hair tunics and chowed on locusts. Did they learn from, adhere to, *and* imitate John?

In summary, the practice of a person welcoming students as disciples permeated both the Greco-Roman Gentile and Jewish subcultures of the first century. As noted above, these relationships included knowledge transfer, devotion, and imitation. Some disciples, received instruction from writings and other posthumous sources as the discipler had already passed away. Which brings us to ask question, what Jesus meant when he says to "make disciples?" Does he have in mind the Platonic idea of pulling out innate knowledge in a person? Does he want to simply impart knowledge like the Sophists and Moses-ites? Does he want his disciples to imitate him? How can we understand the contours of Jesus's discipleship compared to his contemporaries?

Jesus's Discipleship

Of all the things Jesus could choose to say to his friends before his ascension, he decides to tell them that he has all authority and they should go make disciples of everyone, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that Christ taught. He could have said, "Make sure you build churches and steeples" or "Focus heavily on miracles and Spirit-informed sermons" or "Tell them I like the WWJD bracelets." Instead, he emphasizes making disciples as his final command

in Matthew. All pastors know that most people listen to the beginning of a sermon and then tune out until after the summary of three points and the poem. We put our best material at the end. If this is Jesus's final charge, Christians would do well to understand what it means…and then just do it.[35] So, what does Jesus want when he tells his followers to make disciples?

If you read a smattering of commentaries on Matthew 28:19, much is made of the participles surrounding the main verb (*μαθητεύσατε*) "make disciples." For example, Craig Blomberg flattens the main verb when he struggles to articulate how much weight should be given to the imperative versus the attendant participle "to go." He rightly notes, "The main command of Christ's commission is 'make disciples,'" but he then diminishes the force of the imperative as he continues, "Too much and too little have often been made of this observation. Too much is made of it when the disciples' 'going' is overly subordinated, so that Jesus's charge is to proselytize merely where one is…"[36] For Blomberg, trying to understand Jesus's charge requires one make sense of the participle and measure it against the weight of the main verb in the command—you cannot make disciples unless you know how you should go. Three-fourths of his paragraph dedicated to v.19a is dedicated to weighing the "go" and he does not put forth a clear definition of the imperative on its own except to make reference to evangelism. "Make disciples" surely means more than evangelize. He must assume the reader intuits what "make disciples" means.

Another Craig, Keener, also allows the participles to define the meaning of "make disciples." He asserts, "The text is clear on the other ways one makes disciples. First of all, one baptizes them under the rulership of Christ…mature disciples must also build the new disciples

[35] Personal philosophy of mine is to "Just Do It."

[36] Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 431.

into stronger discipleship by teaching them Jesus's message."[37] In his IVP Bible Background Commentary, Keener even more explicitly defines "make disciples" by stating "making disciples involves three elements: 1) going…2) baptizing… 3) teaching."[38]

R.T. France agrees wholeheartedly as he posits about the Commission, "The sentence structure is of a main verb in the imperative, 'make disciples,' followed by two uncoordinated participles, 'baptizing,' 'teaching,' *which spell out the process of making disciples* (emphasis mine).[39] While I am not in the habit of disagreeing with esteemed scholars, one wonders how they would define "make disciples" if Jesus had left off the participles. Does "make disciples" have its own meaning apart from these descriptors?

To be clear, going, baptizing, and teaching must be part of the discipleship process if Jesus included them here. Yet, the verb "*μαθητεύσατε*" carries the imperatival force of the command and has its own definition apart from the explanatory clauses. In his Greek Grammar, Daniel B. Wallace says of dependent verbal participles (in our case going, baptizing, teaching), that "adverbial participles like adverbs are dependent on a verb."[40] Dr. Wallace sometimes states the obvious as he constantly seeks the utmost clarity in his writing. *Depend*ent verb clauses *depend* on the main clause. Going, baptizing, and teaching depend on making disciples, not the

[37] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 720.

[38] Craig S. Keener, ed., *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Second Edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014), 125.

[39] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2007), 1115.

[40] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapid: Zondervan, 2001), 622.

other way around. Certainly, they modify and explain, but they only help clarify the main verb rather than encapsulate it.

Perhaps a better way to relate the verb and its participles, comes from Lindsay Arthur who deserves quoting at length:

> A major implication of the argument that 28:19 is governed by a semantic structure of ideological particularization is that the reader considers the possibility that the Matthean Jesus gives a general command, *μαθητεύσατε* (Matt 28:19a), which he particularizes in the surrounding participles, developing or unpacking that command, without necessarily exhausting its meaning. This permits the reader to examine the remainder of Matthew to discover any additional meaning that may reside there. If this is the preferred approach, and I believe that should be, then the reader may find that the proverbial whole (i.e. *μαθητεύσατε,* 28:19a) is greater the sum of its parts (i.e., the adjoining participles).[41]

In other words, make disciples gets shading from the surrounding participles, but gets the rest of its definitional vibrancy from the entire Gospel of Matthew. How do we make disciples? Allow Matthew's portrayal of discipleship from start to finish to define the term. It is not less than baptizing and teaching but certainly is more.

In addition to grammar, narrative criticism also points us to looking at the whole of Matthew for understanding of our term *μαθητεύσατε.*[42] Pointing to the redaction criticism method of analysis, Richard Edwards writes, "it is argued, for example, that a careful comparison of all references to the disciples (descriptions, synonyms, etc.) would produce an accurate

[41] Lindsay D. Arthur, *The Meaning of "Make Disciples" in the Broader Context of the Gospel of Matthew* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2022), 102.

[42] A terrific treatment on viewing discipleship through narrative lens is Jeannine Brown's work *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective.* Specifically, her concluding chapter highlights how the story of the disciples shows both positive and negative aspects of Jesus's original disciples. While beyond the scope of this thesis, noting the failure of the disciples should also play a part in the discipleship process for Christians today. Disciples fail. And, they receive grace. This also shapes a person's identity as perfection might be the goal, but never the reality. This should allow us to model Jesus's grace toward ourselves and others. See Jeannine K. Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective: The Portrayal and Function of the Matthean Disciples*, Academia Biblica, no. 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

reconstruction of the author's understanding of the disciples."[43] He then counters by saying this methodology does not take into account that Matthew chose to write his Gospel as a story, not an essay. He continues, "It is because the Gospel is a story that I want to place primary emphasis on the portrayal of the disciples as characters in the narrative."[44]

While redaction criticism has produced terrific analysis on discipleship, "scholarly study, of late, has been enriched and enlivened by a different approach, one that takes seriously the narrative character of the Gospels and sets out to examine them as stories."[45] The Gospels are stories, and stories require analytical tools native to their genre.

All great students of literature know that the use of story means the author gets to show instead of tell what he means. The reader of a narrative must look at the descriptions *and* the portrayals to understand the nature of something or someone. By analyzing the story and in particular the way the disciples are portrayed, "Matthew is, in fact, also guiding his readers to understanding what discipleship will mean for them."[46] The whole story—description *and* dialogue, prose *and* poetry, setting *and* symbolism—show us what something is like. For example, if you want to know what Lucy Pevensie is like, you have to read the scene where she sticks her face into Aslan's mane, read the dialogue between the characters, and take note of the descriptions. All of those moments define Lucy. For discipleship, you must do the same when you read the word disciple or see discipleship taking place.

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[43] Fernando F. Segovia, ed., *Discipleship in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 47.

[44] Segovia, *Discipleship in the New Testament*, 47.

[45] Terence L. Donaldson, "Guiding Readers--Making Disciples: Discipleship in Matthew's Narrative Strategy," in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 31.

[46] Donaldson, "Matthew's Narrative Strategy," 30.

So how does discipleship get portrayed through the story? For starters the two bookends of the discipleship process—calling and commissioning—have repeated vocabulary which tells the reader the two passages are connected. When one compares Matthew 4:19 and 28:19 the "declarations are connected by elements relating to time (beginning and end of a journey), location (both events occur in Galilee), characters (Jesus and his disciples are common to both events), and semantics (words of similar meaning are common to both accounts)."[47] These literary connections likely mean that Matthew sees the latter command as an extension of the former. The disciples are called to fish men and then commissioned to make disciples. What happens in between fills out the meaning of man-fishing and disciple-making.

The first bookend also gives us some context unrelated to the Great Commission. In stories "the initial appearance of a character is often important, for it creates expectations that the readers carry with them into the rest of the story…the reader's first impression of the disciples is that they will function as Jesus's 'helpers.'"[48] In other words, when Jesus calls the disciples and they drop everything (Matt 4), he does so because he intends to turn them into disciple makers that serve him. Jesus makes disciples that make disciples of Jesus. Rather than a pyramid scheme where each disciple gathers more disciples to himself, Jesus's disciples are to serve Jesus by fishing people *for* Jesus. Matthew makes this clear from the outset so the reader can look for how this will happen as the story unfolds.

Making disciples for Jesus rather than for oneself is one of the unique features of Jesus's discipleship. While other masters assume their disciples will eventually gain followers of their

[47] Arthur, *Make Disciples,* 97.

[48] Donaldson, "Matthew's Narrative Strategy," 35.

own, the entire Christian discipleship experience means making disciples who follow Christ, not other Christ followers.

The uniform usage of *μαθητής* "always implies the existence of a personal attachment which shapes the whole life of the one described as *μαθητής,* and which in its particularity leaves no doubt as to who is deploying the formative power."[49] Jesus forms disciples. Jesus ultimately *μαθητεύσατε.* Certainly, imitation, teaching, and closeness will mark the relationship of the fellow disciples, but all subsequent disciples' identities change as followers of Jesus.[50] Admittedly, Paul does say to follow him as he follows Christ, but one could hardly read all of his thirteen letters and assume Paul wishes for people to call themselves "Disciples of Paul." Just one peek at the letter to the Corinthians where he with some modicum of snark mocks their divisions and one sees his understanding of discipleship comports with Jesus's view put forth by Matthew.[51]

After the initial calling, Matthew sketches a robust picture of discipleship through various literary means. Matthew records Jesus teaching (most obviously seen in the five great discourses),[52] modeling behavior, answering questions or objections, calling for distinctive living, and sharing meals with surprising guests. Looking at the entirety of the Matthean

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[49] Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1985), 441.

[50] The disciples of Jesus represent Jesus and call others to Jesus. In other words, "a disciple of Jesus can thus never appear as one who has surpassed the role of disciple and begins his own school." See Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1991), 374.

[51] See 1 Corinthians 3 for a master class in passive aggressive trolling.

[52] Far too often scholars have narrowed their scope of discipleship to these large blocks of teaching. By doing so, "scholars may have neglected to focus equally on what the Matthean Jesus does and does not do, and even on the implications of his silence." Arthur, *Make Disciples,* 209. The words of Jesus and the actions of Jesus are necessary for a full picture of discipleship.

narrative, one sees the multifaceted nature of discipleship. Rather than simply baptizing and teaching, "a whole array of actions, attributes, and qualities come to be associated with his narration with the discipleship ideal."[53] Put more simply, "disciples are to make disciples of others in the same way that Jesus made disciples of them throughout the Gospel."[54] This means teaching, caring, healing, loving, and breaking bread together, among other things.

As one sorts through the kaleidoscopic picture of discipleship, identity formation activities begin to emerge. Through the various discipleship activities, disciples inevitably grow in their understanding of God, themselves, and others. Regarding God, disciples must answer Jesus when he asks, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt 16:13–17). They have to wrestle with Jesus walking on water—something only God can do (Matt 14:22–33). They must give to God what belongs to God (Matt 22:15–22). Regarding self-identity, disciples must know what it means to pick up their cross and follow Jesus (Matt 16:24–28). They must also deal with the intolerable compliment that God would go looking for them like a shepherd would go after a lost sheep (Matt 18:10–14).

Disciples must deal with the highs and lows of great understanding and at times necessary rebuke (Matt 16:13–23). Regarding the understanding of others, disciples must be shaped by both passages of love of others (Matt 22:34–40) as well as differentiation of behavior from other groups (Matt 20:24–28). They also must understand what it means to be salt, light, and a city upon a hill (Matt 5:13–16).

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[53] Donaldson, "Matthew's Narrative Strategy," 44.

[54] David R Bauer, "The Theme of Mission in Matthew's Gospel from the Perspective of the Great Commission," *The Asbury Journal* 74, no. 2 (2019): 251.

The discipleship process in Matthew shapes a person's understanding of God's identity, their own identity, and the identity of others. Though we limited our study to Matthew because of its inclusion of the Great Commission, Ernest Best wrote a terrific book on discipleship in the Gospel of Mark. In it, Best proposes the best way to study discipleship is by considering "the disciple in relation to himself; how he must view himself and deal with himself and what is required from him….and the disciple in relation to others…those who are not yet Christians…and those who are his fellow disciples." Best, in other words, believes discipleship is best understood by considering how the person begins to understand himself and others.[55] I agree with Best. If discipleship is more than baptizing and teaching, then covering the pages of the Gospels are examples of discipleship. Within those examples identities get formed.

What about Baptizing and Teaching?

If "making disciples" has to do with the activities found in the entire book of Matthew, why does Jesus include the two qualifiers of baptizing and teaching? When considering what baptizing and teaching accomplish, they serve as helpful metonymy for much of the discipleship identify formation enterprise. From an analysis of all of Matthew, one can conclude that "discipleship means not only trusting in Jesus and identifying with him, as baptism pictures, but also the pursuit of obeying him,"[56] which necessitates teaching for future disciples. Baptism serves as a shorthand for calling, believing, and conversion. Teaching allows the disciples to learn about God and what is expected as a member of this group of Jesus-followers in which they

[55] Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 4 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 13.

[56] Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapid: Baker Academic, 2017), 402.

now belong. Teaching also includes the attendant following and obeying of this teaching. Taking a closer look at both baptism and teaching also reveals the identity formation component of discipleship.

Baptizing Forms Identities

If one wants to argue that discipleship is ultimately identity formation, then turning to the participle "baptizing" offers perhaps the strongest case. For starters the three-fold name in which a person is baptized demonstrates that the person is "brought existentially in the sphere of, and in submission to, the active, powerful presence of the Father, Son, and Spirit, so that one *belongs* to the Father, Son, and Spirit (e.g. 1 Cor 1:10-17)" (emphasis mine).[57] The act of baptism symbolizes a transference of proprietorship—the subject belongs to God now (or, perhaps more accurately, she is declaring to others she recognizes she belongs to God now because she already did). And, as Paul emphasizes to the Corinthians, this belonging to God puts a person into a group of others who also belong to God. Identity takes shape as one who lives in the recognition of God's claim on her life and as she rises from the waters and looks around, she sees the community of the claimed rejoicing in the decision.

For modern, western Christians, the identity formation that happens at baptism strikes at the heart our psychological needs. Our therapeutic culture in the twentieth century tied one's happiness to their self-esteem, and that self-esteem was tied to public recognition.[58] This "quest for identity concerns an innate soul-cry on the part of every person for recognition,

[57] Bauer, "The Theme of Mission," 255.

[58] Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Profile Books, 2018), 100.

acknowledgement, and worth. Christian baptism speaks profoundly to the individual at the level of personal identity."[59] Drop into any church baptism and listen to the words spoken over the catechumen and consider how those might meet a deep need to be affirmed and recognized. Language like "washed", "new life", "brother" or "sister", "belong", "rejoice", "hope", "imperishable inheritance", "election", and "chosen", often give context to the baptism. Those affirmations this will shape the person's understanding of self. At its best:

> baptism is an entrée into a participation in the life of the triune God, into the eternal communion of love, peace, fellowship, and mission that is the triune life, and into an experience in which the baptizand is now embraced, as they find themselves loved and accepted, acknowledged and recognized, forgiven and reconciled, by a love that posits and creates worth.[60]

Trinitarian identity, personal identity, and group identity all bound up into the sacrament of baptism helps achieve discipleship's goal.

In addition to baptism forming the catechumen, it also forms the community of witnesses. Someone once told me that he baptized himself in his bathtub one night after a mystical moment with Jesus. I have no doubt about the sincerity of his faith in that moment, but I asked if he would like to also have a public baptism with his church community. Not wanting to invalidate his very real experience with God, I explained that baptism not only meant something meaningful to him, but it would also mean something to us as we get to participate and rejoice in his powerful moment. At its best, liturgy shapes people.[61] Sacraments shape people.

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[59] O'Neil, "The Role of Baptism in Christian Identity Formation," 465.

[60] O'Neil, "The Role of Baptism in Christian Identity Formation," 465

[61] In an ideal world this would always be true. Unfortunately, this statement deserves a caveat and perhaps Scot McKnight gives the best disclaimer when he wrote in response to "liturgy shapes people": "I believe this. I don't believe this. Some of the most liturgically exposed people…are some of the least formed I know. Some of the least liturgical are some of the most formed." So we will simply say, liturgy without the empowering work of the Spirit is nothing. And, the empowering work of the Spirit without liturgy is still everything, because God is everything. Yet, through the Christian experience over the centuries, liturgy has a shaping effect on people when done in a Spirit driven way.

Something mystical and transformational happens when week in and week out a person performs the truths of the Christian faith. While looking at character formation, one researcher noted "a conceptual and intrinsic, rather than merely external and causal, relationship between liturgy and ethics, arguing that prayer and worship over time form believers in deep affections characteristic of biblically inspired Christian tradition."[62] When you participate in worship, your insides change, not just your outside behavior.

Performance theorists have realized in their study what Christian practice suggested all along: "Ritual is the key to its function in the development and maintenance of human identity."[63] From the feasts in Leviticus and Deuteronomy to the gathered worship of Corinthians to the worship in Revelation, God instituted and will institute rituals to form our identities. When a person is baptized, not only do they undergo identity formation, but those who watch are reminded of their own identity. This reminding, if done repeatedly, shapes their affections and allegiances.

One powerful study of group identity formed by religious liturgy came out of the *American Journal of Psychology*.[64] Researchers discovered that towns in the south in 1890–1929 experienced fewer lynchings of black people where there was a greater incidence of mixed-race churches. Tragically, the study also purported that towns without integrated churches but that had larger numbers of black-controlled religious groups experienced higher levels of racial violence. The researchers concluded that without the integration, racial hierarchy was strengthened in

[62] Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill, "Baptism and Identity Formation: Convergences in Ritual and Ethical Perspectives A Dialogue," *Societas Liturgica* 42 (2012): 156.

[63] Bordeyne and Morrill, "Baptism and Identity Formation," 157.

[64] Amy Kate Bailey and Karen A. Snedker, "Practicing What They Preach? Lynching and Religion in the American South, 1890–1929," *American Journal of Sociology* 117, no. 3 (November 2011): 844–87, https://doi.org/10.1086/661985.

white-only pews. But, in churches where both black and white parishioners took communion, they created cross-racial solidarity that diminished racial violence.

Liturgy forms and at times malforms people. Breaking bread with "the other" can literally save lives as a person begins to understand there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. If an individual takes bread and wine from the same table as me, then in some way they belong to me. This is why Paul can repeatedly point to baptism as a metaphor to remind the Galatians of their new identity in Christ as the children of Abraham (Gal 3:27–28) and can rebuke the Corinthians for failing to live as one body, which was accomplished through baptism into one Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). Baptism shapes the whole community, and a helpful pastoral directive to realign division and competing allegiances and identities is "Remember your baptism." That small phrase carries big meaning.

Teaching Forms Us

Circling back to our Google SEO optimizations, hardly anyone would define discipleship without including a teaching component. For our three articles, this seems to be the crux of the definition. I am a teacher; I wholeheartedly agree that teaching is tantamount in discipleship. However, perhaps the issue churches have had over the years is missing the telos of teaching. Information transference matters tremendously in Geometry and carpentry, but a bigger, more transformative goal should undergird discipleship's strategy.

When looking at post-colonial writing on the Great Commission, justifiable lament occurs over the way the Commission has been abused to justify subjugation in the name of evangelistic fervor. This should never be. A common thread in post-colonial discussions on Matt 28:18–20 highlights "an undue emphasis on teaching over the other activities, like social justice,

in traditional interpretations and applications of the Great Commission."[65] However, I would argue the bigger problem is the cherry-picking of what people teach, because Jesus talks about social justice all the time. In fact, the weightier things of the law are justice (Matt 23:23).[66] Furthermore, teaching "is also specified in the final commissioning as teaching *obedience* to all that Jesus has commanded. Given that Jesus's exhortations in Matthew have highlighted justice, mercy, and covenant loyalty…it will not do to isolate the activity of teaching from social justice."[67]

If someone teaches the commands of Jesus but never performs acts of social justice, then he is like a pickleball coach who does not own a paddle and balls. That person should not only be unemployed, but therapy should be suggested. The "teaching" referenced in the Great Commission involves obedience.[68] Obedience stems from normative behaviors expected of those whose identity has been shaped as the redeemed of God, energized for doing good works, and

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[65] Jeannine K. Brown and Kyle A. Roberts, *Matthew*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2018), 453.

[66] My own evangelical tradition has a woefully anemic view of justice—preferring Cops to compassion. Yet, somehow Jesus's ethic of non-violence also causes those in my camp to believe that necessary protest today distracts from the gospel of salvation as if Jesus never flipped over a table. Blomberg offers a good corrective on Jesus's social concern when he writes, "We misrepresent his ethic of nonviolence and nonretaliation if we label it one of passivity; he is better likened to the Old Testament prophets who strong denunciations of the injustice they saw called on others to practice God's righteous standards." Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 390. Harvie Conn would agree. E wrote a book called *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace.* In it, Conn, a PCA missionary after accepting that his efforts to evangelize prostitutes at a Korean brothel utterly failed, he asked the women why that might be. The women told him that if he really cared for them as he claims in his gospel presentations, then he should tell the customers to stop abusing the women when they pay for sex. Harvie Conn admirably took up this cause and watched as many women accepted their new identities as Christ followers. Conn pleads with other conservative evangelicals to pursue justice as it is part of the good news. Harvie M. Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Philipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1992).

[67] Brown and Roberts, *Matthew*, 453.

[68] The phrase "Some things are taught, and some things are caught" aptly applies to this sort of teaching. Teaching others in the disciple enterprise requires that, "They [future disciples] need to be taught by word *and example* to obey Jesus' commands" (emphasis mine). See Brian Charles Wintle et al., eds., *South Asia Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 1284.

grouped together in a community meant to be salt and light in a decaying and dark world. Teaching should shape our understanding of God, ourselves, and others. Anything less should not be called biblical teaching.

Formation for Matthew's Readers

Not only did Jesus intend to shape his first hearers through his teaching, but Matthew also clearly intends to shape the readers of his Gospel in the way he presents Jesus's teaching. For starters, Matthew uses strategic terms to define and delineate "insiders" vs "outsiders"—a necessary component of identity formation. While *Mean Girls* shows the ugly side of exclusion, it is necessary to know which groups a person belongs to and the expectation of behavior as a member of that group. Matthew likes to use "righteousness" to define the identity of Jesus's followers against outsider groups.[69] When Matthew uses this term, he means those who commit to covenant faithfulness or conformity to God's word.[70] Calling Jesus's followers "righteous" forms our understanding of how we are to behave as members of this privileged group.

In addition to using names and descriptions, Greco-Roman groups had other ways to differentiate themselves. Such ways included having a central focus; claiming exclusive revelation; practicing unique rituals; creating and adhering to social organization; criticizing of opponents; articulating the community's origin story; and aligning expectation of the

[69] Francois P. Viljoen, "Righteousness and Identity Formation in the Sermon on the Mount," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 69, no. 1 (2013): 1.

[70] Often the word righteousness carries two separate connotations: 1) Torah observant/covenant faithful and 2) right standing before God. Since Matthew would have had a Jewish understanding in mind when he wrote his gospel, we take the former to be the way he intends the word to be understood in his Gospel. See McKnight for a discussion on the term. Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Tremper Longman and Scot McKnight, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016) 43-45.

community's behaviors.[71] Matthew employs all of these differentiating elements to the effect that his gospel is "identity-forming and lifestyle shaping narrative…it shapes the appropriate way of life, set of practices and behaviors."[72] Not only did Jesus's teaching shape a person, but Matthew's presentation of Jesus's whole life intends to form subsequent Christians' identities.

If you grabbed a pencil and wrote down everything you observed about the disciples of Jesus, you would jot down many behaviors, values, names, and rituals that set a person apart from those who do not follow Jesus. Teaching the book of Matthew as he intended will result in the hearers having a greater conscientiousness of the collective righteousness of those who belong to Jesus.

Conclusion

Discipleship is identity formation. From the first-century disciples who walked with Jesus to those who must learn about those strolls through the Gospels, the discipleship process aims to change a person's understanding of God, herself, and others. Baptizing and teaching do a good job summarizing the main activities of discipleship. And, within those two activities we see inherent identity -ormation elements. A person is spiritually changed by baptism, and they are also psychologically changed as they adopt a change in their relationships to the Trinity and others in the triune's family. As the community watches the baptism, they are reminded of their own identity and strengthened through the reminder. Discipleship without teaching is dead. But, teaching without works is not discipleship. Teaching the words *and* actions of Jesus fill out the contours of the discipleship curriculum, but the classroom is meant to be an immersive experience, not lecture.

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[71] Viljoen, "Righteousness and Identity Formation," 2.

[72] Viljoen, "Righteousness and Identity Formation," 2.

Finally, while disciples become "fishers of men" for Jesus, they never bear the weight of the responsibility hook, line, and sinker. Rather, disciple-makers:

> will embrace the truth that God (through Jesus) is the principal actor in the disciple-making process that leads to salvation…he calls people to be his disciples…he saves those who follow him obediently…and he imports his ongoing presence to his disciples for the purpose of undertaking his mission…[73]

Not only does this mean the pressure to disciple others falls off our shoulders, but it also means our discipleship processes should look a lot like Jesus's. Which means we must now turn our attention to the oft-overlooked discipleship method of Jesus: asking boat loads of questions.

[73] Arthur, *Make Disciples*, 209.

CHAPTER 3

WHERE DID JESUS LEARN TO ASK QUESTIONS? JESUS'S RHETORICAL, EFFECTIVE DISCIPLESHIP STRATEGY

Jesus asks a lot of questions. By most counts he asks over three hundred questions, is asked about one hundred eighty, and answers fewer than ten.[74] This means Jesus asks more than thirty times more questions than he answers. In John's Gospel, Jesus's first and last utterances are questions.[75] The first red letters of John present Jesus asking some new tagalongs, "What are you looking for?" At the end of the Gospel, the last bit of red ink records Jesus asking his disciples who are concerned about the fate of one of their own, "What is that to you?" Perhaps this last question inspired C.S. Lewis to put on the lips of Aslan, "'Child,' said the Lion, 'I am telling you your story, not hers. No one is told any story but their own.'"[76] Since John takes some liberties that the Synoptic authors do not regarding the chronology of the life of Jesus, one safely assumes that the decision to open Jesus's mouth and place in it a question at the beginning was just that: a decision. Whether or not the first words of Jesus John overheard were a question, he redacts his Gospel to make it so for the reader. Robert Alter reminds us that, "at the beginning of any new story, the point at which dialogue first emerges will be worthy of special attention, and in most instances, the initial words spoken by a personage will be revelatory, perhaps more in

[74] The exact number of questions Jesus answers is either 3 (Dear) or 8 (Copenhaver) depending on who's counting. But the disparity between questions he asks and those he answers is quite high regardless. See Martin B. Copenhaver, *Jesus Is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), XVIII. And John Dear, *The Questions of Jesus: Challenging Ourselves to Discover Life's Great Answers* (New York: Image Books, 2004).

[75] Douglas Estes, *The Questions of Jesus in John: Logic, Rhetoric and Persuasive Discourse*, Biblical Interpretation Series, vol. 115 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1.

[76] C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 281.

manner than in matter, constituting an important moment in the exposition of character."[77] Jesus undoubtedly said many things in John's presence. By starting Jesus's dialogue with a query, John wants his audience to know Jesus is the type of person who asks questions.

While Jesus has plenty of unique attributes like being fully God and fully man, having been born to a virgin, and that neat walking on water thing he can do, he also possesses plenty of characteristics that emerge from his cultural setting. He wears a tunic and sandals rather than bell bottom jeans and Nikes. Jesus's use of question-asking as a rhetorical device also demonstrates this reality—it is a product of his *Sitz im Leben*. While scholars enjoy debating whether Greco-Roman or Jewish influences more heavily impact certain aspects of the New Testament people and practices, that debate extends beyond the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, most of the time those debates result in some hybrid answer that reflects the Hellenized Jewish background of much of the New Testament. Suffice it to say, looking at both streams of sources—Hellenic and Jewish—will inform our understanding about Jesus's questions.

Jesus Christ and the Philosopher's Tome

Before we can discuss rhetorical sources that might impact Jesus, we must first define our term rhetoric. One can hardly improve upon Ben Witherington's definition when he states, "When I use the term 'rhetoric,' I am referring to the ancient art of persuasion used from the time of Aristotle onwards through and beyond the NT era in the Greek-speaking world to convince one audience or another about something…I am talking about all that went into convincing an audience about some subject."[78] Put more simply, rhetoric is persuasive speech. We will discuss

[77] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New and Revised (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 93-94.

[78] Ben Witherington III, *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion In and Of the New Testament* (Eugene: Cascade, 2009), ix. I said one can hardly improve because I would push back his

question-asking as an instrument in persuading others. Question-asking falls under the heading of rhetoric when the goal of using this device is to persuade or impact the listener. Of course, not all questions fall under the heading "rhetoric," as they have different purposes than persuasion. A person asking someone the time when trying to catch a train versus asking one's partner the time with eyebrows raised at a party that ran out of pizza and Dr Pepper two hours ago has different agendas. The first seeks data; the second communicates persuasively. We will argue that Jesus's use (and the Gospel writers' inclusion) of question-asking falls in line with rhetoric. When an omniscient God asks questions, he hardly seeks answers. The first question God asks in the Bible—where are you?—is akin to me asking my dog Corrie if she ate my pizza crust when I looked away. I know, she knows I know, we are working to repair our relationship. Questions from God seek to do something more than elucidate information; they act upon the person. Those types of questions accomplish what rhetoric aims to do.

Greco-Roman Rhetorical Influences

One can hardly think of questions as part of rhetoric without one philosopher dominating the landscape. Afterall, he has a whole method named after him. To discuss questions as a tool in the rhetorician's toolbox, Socrates comes first.[79] What most of us call the Socratic method refers to the ancient practice of *elenchus*.[80] This practice uses an interlocutor who defines something

timeline to include Socrates and Plato who come before Aristotle. Yet, that is splitting hairs—something philosophers would do.

[79] Not first chronologically, but first in priority since he has a method of questioning named after him.

[80] Technically the *elenchus* has a strict method. Namely, "the elenchus is often used in describing the Socratic dialectical method. This model in its simple form can be sketched as follows: Socrates lets one of his interlocutors pose a definition of x, after which Socrates will interrogate the interlocutor up to the point where the latter has to admit that his definition was, indeed, wrong and that he does not know what x is." See Gary Alan Scott,

and then is interrogated with questions until they cry, I mean, until they admit their definition is incorrect. Questions, for Socrates, lead to truth—and a defeated dialogue partner. Most often today, people think of the "Socratic method" as asking lots of questions in the educational setting. Thankfully, most third-grade teachers are not actually applying the *elenchus* strategy in the technical sense—not enough people are trained in EMDR for that. The Socratic Method while bearing Socrates name, has Plato to thank for surviving all these years. Plato, a disciple of Socrates, applied the Socratic method in many of his works, but also contributed to ancient philosophy in the areas of metaphysics and epistemology. Even the most casual student of ancient philosophy knows who comes next: Aristotle. Socrates taught Plato who taught Aristotle, and this educative process was not unique to these three.

For the Greek-speaking world, education took place in the home as well as in schools—typically for boys and young men at the gymnasia. Around the 5th century BCE, the schools added rhetoric to their curriculum. These schools taught Greek grammar to younger boys (7–14), and then theory, lectures, and famous orators to cultivate finer language skills to the older boys.[81] Although Jewish, the apostle Paul living in a Hellenized world most likely received rhetorical training. His practice in Ephesus of persuading others at the Hall of Tyrannus offers a glimpse into praxis of his education (Acts 19:8–10). In commenting on this episode in Paul's life, Craig Keener notes that Paul performed like he was a professor and not just a student of rhetoric during these two years. Keener offers:

> The format of more traditional schools varied: teachers could offer lectures, either formal (sometimes read) or informal; many philosophic schools also included "the exegesis and

Philosophy in Dialogue: Plato's Many Devices, Topics in Historical Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 208.

[81] Leo G. Perdue, "Rhetoric and the Art of Persuasion in the Wisdom of Solomon," in *Christian Origins and Hellenistic Judaism,* ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 346.

> discussion of texts"; class discussions (at times using questions and answers) were common; finally, teachers could dialogue with one student in front of the rest of the students. Both Luke and Paul lead us to expect that Paul would have used the Scriptures for texts and that he may have used some acceptable philosophic forms such as diatribe.[82]

In other words, Paul learned rhetoric so well in his schooling and was so steeped in that pedagogical formation that when given the opportunity in Ephesus, he created his own Christian school using the same tools of the Hellenized trade.

The ubiquitousness of rhetorical education naturally leads to divergent opinions on how best to persuade others. With a plethora of schools comes a divergence of theory. We mentioned earlier the disagreements between philosophers on discipleship practices, and some of the disagreement had to do with rhetorical strategy. For Socrates and Plato, to educate or persuade a person involved asking questions to draw out information they already possessed, and for the Sophists they prefer to lecture at a person to provide knowledge.[83] Despite the debates on *how* to do rhetoric, the idea that a person *should* do rhetoric was a foregone conclusion. It was a key feature in education in Greece and Rome, and competitions for public speaking even occurred at the highest levels—the Olympics.[84] One could gain the admiration of their fellow countrymen by either heaving a discus far, running fast, or speaking well. Placing rhetoric alongside the Olympic athletic competitions shows how a culture obsessed with honor viewed the field of rhetoric. If you cannot walk the walk, you can always talk the talk.

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[82] Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 3:2833.

[83] This is an overly simplified argument, but it gets as the broad strokes of the issue. For a helpful summary of ancient philosophers and their philosophies see John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2015), 46-85.

[84] Brian Wright offers extensive evidence that rhetorical competitions happened throughout the ancient world at public events. He even discusses one rhetorician, Statius, lamenting that although he won the Alban games he lost at the Capitoline games in the same year. If we have extant evidence of the losers, this practice certainly was widespread. Brian J. Wright, *Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus: A Window into Early Christian Reading Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 32-34.

Rhetoric also included more than speaking; it involved writing. The ability to persuade comes from the throat and the pen. While many argue that literacy rates in the ancient world were abysmal, newer research is showing that people wrote and read more than we previously assumed.[85] For example, Seneca the Younger (4BCE–65CE) tells a story about a man being stabbed to death by a mob of people with their styluses—writing utensils.[86] While the story is clearly hyperbole, it reveals the assumption that everyday folks walked around with a pen in hand. It also reveals the more widespread written culture of rhetoric. Two satirists—Persius and Juvenal—make fun of the fact that everyone fancies himself a poet.[87] Juvenal—especially crabby—mocks the number of public recitations in his city and laments that these inferior performances are the worst part of living in Rome.[88] Rhetoric as far as the eye can see, and ear

[85] In his seminal work on literacy in the Greco-Roman world William Harris looks at several factors that might help or hinder literacy such as availability of writing materials, necessity for work and trade, and inevitability of reading for politics, religion, and civic life. His extremely thorough research leads him to conclude that the literacy rate in the Roman empire during the first century was around 20-30% for adult males and 10% for adult females. While Harris' research provided incredible insight into the educational, social, and civic literary culture of the ancient world, many scholars today now question the legitimacy of such a low rate of literacy. For example, Stanley Porter and Andrew Pitts in their article on Paul's education and access to the scriptures take issue with the oversimplified categories of literate vs illiterate. They counter his claim when they state, "he [Harris] seems to have neglected the fact that even those who were illiterate came into contact with literate culture. For example, a person illiterate in Greek might need to have a contract written out, and so would be a part of literate culture by virtue of needing to have this document prepared, and needing to deal with the consequences of it, such as a document sent in return." In other words, an individual who might need to read contracts for their job, but lacks formal training to read authors like Livy or Seneca would not fall neatly into the categories of literate or illiterate. Furthermore, excavations in Pompeii show graffiti on the walls. Presumably written for the non-elite, the walls of Pompeii suggest a greater literacy among the commoners than once assumed. See William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 266. Andrew W. Pitts and Stanley E. Porter, "Paul and His Bible: His Education and Use of the Scriptures of Israel," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 5 (2008): 32. Ben Witherington, "Graffiti at the SBL!," *Ben Witherington* (blog), December 16, 2008, http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/12/graffiti-at-sbl.html.

[86] *Clem*. 1.15.1. quoted in Brian J. Wright, "Ancient Literacy in New Testament Research: Incorporating A Few More Lines of Enquiry," *Trinity Journal* 36, no. 2 (2015): 161–89.

[87] Wright, *Communal Reading*, 83.

[88] Wright, *Communal Reading*, 83.

can hear. With the plethora of training and opportunity, if a person in the first century wanted to persuade others, he had better have some working knowledge and practice in the art of rhetoric.

Amidst the sea of fancy talkers and writers, we return to Aristotle, because he deserves special consideration. His *On Rhetoric* states that public address was morally neutral and could be used for good or evil, *tov* or *ra'*. To discern which depended on the character of the orator. His three-fold considerations included the truth and logic of the argument, the ability to persuade the audience, and the emotions aroused in the audience to accept what was argued.[89]

Most first year English students come to know these as the logos, ethos, and pathos of persuasion. Aristotle breaks with his triumvirate buddies, Socrates and Plato, and their logical development of questions in his later works. In his *Interpretation,* Aristotle puts forward that proposition of the declarative sort rather than prayers, wishes, and questions belong in academic study and the rest belong to rhetoric. His opinion departs from earlier educational philosophy. Where rhetoric was previously a featured player in the academic pursuit, Aristotle demotes it. For students of Aristotle, "Questions as well as other non-propositional statements, quickly became second-class citizens within the kingdoms of language, philosophy, and science."[90]

Looking at much of the education system in America, one easily sees Aristotle's fingerprints. As we mentioned earlier, children in the US primarily learn through propositional declarations.[91]

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[89] George A. Kennedy, *Aristotle On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) ix.

[90] Estes, *The Questions of Jesus in John*, 5.

[91] I want to take a moment and say that educators in America are criminally underpaid and undervalued. This statement is not a critique of teachers. It is a critique of the philosophy of education handed down to teachers. I am nothing without my teachers, and I have nothing but admiration for those who would enter this noble field knowing it means a life of poverty and student and parental shenanigans. God bless teachers.

Jesus must not have read much Aristotle. Despite Aristotle's demotion of rhetoric, the world around Jesus included public speaking, communal reading, and even competitions for the ability to speak persuasively. If Jesus wanted to reach the crowds, he would need to appropriate some of this Greco-Roman culture into his communication.

In his book *Moral Exhortation*, Malherbe begins, "The moral teaching of the early Christians in many ways resembled that of their pagan neighbors…Modern scholars have shown that already the earliest Christian writers, represented in this book by the New Testament and the apostolic fathers were considerably indebted to their pagan predecessors and contemporaries for how and what they taught."[92] Notice his inclusion of *how* they taught.

How exactly did the Greeks and the Romans teach? According to Malherbe, it was through public discourse. These communal reading events took place in public spaces as well as in the homes of the wealthy, which led to the accessibility of the information for the masses. Malherbe argues that this commonness of the public discourse events—meeting the people where they were—contributed to the spread of ideas.

One might press too far into Hellenistic rhetorical sources if she concludes Plato had a greater influence on Jesus than the Pentateuch. Yet the fact remains that Jesus spoke as an itinerant prophet and preacher claiming the Kingdom of God was at hand. He went even further and claimed to be God.

Jesus would need more than flat, dull speech to convince people of his true identity. Jesus's use of chreia, fable (parable), enconmium, vituperation, syncrisis, and other rhetorical strategies allowed him to compete for the attention of the masses among the cacophony of voices

[92] Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation, A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks, Library of Early Christianity 4 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989), 11.

in his day.[93] Jesus's use of questions to persuade and impact his listener would have placed him squarely among the other rhetoricians. While the content of his message differed greatly from that of Plato and Juvenal, his delivery, at times, looked like the deliveries of these ancient philosophers and writers. Lest you think, though, that Jesus would have been seen as completely Hellenized, he also would reflected his Jewish upbring as well.

Jewish Sources

People sometimes mistakenly equate Jesus's rhetorical questions with later Rabbinic traditions such as the Talmud. Their assumption fails to take into consideration a couple of factors. First, there is no monolithic tradition of question-asking in the Talmud that one could describe as "Rabbinic." The later Babylonian Talmud has a much more developed question format than the earlier material. When comparing Bavli's arguments (Babylonian) to earlier ones, "the style of its discourse, the character of its literary units, the flow of the text—all differ markedly from its Palestinian counterpart. A span of 200-300 years, however, is ample time for styles, interests, and values to change along with shifting social, political, economic, and cultural circumstances."[94] In other words, the later Talmud—further from Jesus than the earlier iterations of it—more closely resembles the style we see in the Gospels. Second, instead of influencing

[93] This list represents a sample of rhetorical devices known and taught in the rhetoric curriculum of Jesus's day. Specifically, the curriculum known as "the *progymnasmata*, intended to facilitate the transition between the study of grammar and the engagement of rhetoric proper." For a helpful summary of these devices and their use in the New Testament see Mikeal C. Parsons and Michael W. Martin, *Ancient Rhetoric and the New Testament: The Influence of Elementary Greek Composition* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018), 9. Another helpful list of rhetorical devices meant to persuade includes assertions, reasons, opposites, analogies, examples, and citations of ancient written testimony from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (87 BCE). See Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 21.

[94] Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 3-4.

Jesus, the Hebraic thought of the Talmud most likely *was* influenced by Hellenized rhetoric. The Rabbis argue similarly to Plato and Aristotle in its more developed places.[95] Where the Talmud sounds like Jesus, we might also find Greek flavors, which accounts for their similarities. Rather than looking at later Jewish sources and importing them back into the life of Christ, one must see that a much stronger and contemporaneous Jewish influence played a part in Jesus's life: the synagogue.

Jesus grew up attending the synagogue and the writers of the Synoptic Gospels place Jesus in the synagogue when he initiates his public ministry (Matt 4:23, Mark 1:14, Luke 4:15).[96] The way those in the synagogue taught and persuaded would impact Jesus's communicative formation. Within the assembly Josephus writes, "the seventh day we set apart from labor; it is dedicated to the learning of our customs and laws, we thinking it proper to reflect on them as well as on any [good] thing else, in order to avoid our sinning."[97] The assembly both read the customs and laws, and they reflected on them. The reflection time gets more detail in Philo. He adds to this picture when he writes:

> Now these laws are taught at other times, indeed, but most especially on the seventh day, for the seventh day is accounted sacred, on which they abstain from all other employments, and frequent the sacred places which are called synagogues, and there they sit according to their age in classes, the younger sitting under the elder, and listening with eager attention in becoming order. Then one, indeed, takes up the holy volume and reads

[95] Jacob Nuesner summarizes this sentiment well when he writes, "Accordingly, when we understand, in particular, the Talmud's dialectical argument, the rhetoric that encapsulates it, the analytical initiatives that drive it, the purposive program that sustains it, then we realize how our sages of blessed memory would frame the intellect of Israel in accord with the intellectual model of philosophy (including science) that through theological Christianity also was to define the West. We therefore shall see in these pages how the Talmud's method of inquiry and mode of argument find intellectual counterparts in Aristotle's natural history and Plato's Socrates' dialectics. See Jacob Neusner, *Jerusalem and Athens: The Congruity of Talmudic and Classical Philosophy*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, v. 52 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 17.

[96] While Jesus attending the synagogue could be debated, Dunn makes a compelling argument from literary sources as well as archaeological discoveries in Galilee. See James D. G. Dunn, "Did Jesus Attend the Synagogue?," in *Jesus and Archaeology*, ed. James H Charlesworth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 206–22.

[97] Josephus, *A.J.* 16.43 (Whiston).

> it, and another of the men of the greatest experience comes forward and explains what is not very intelligible, for a great many precepts are delivered in enigmatical modes of expression, and allegorically, as the old fashion.[98]

Notice in both Josephus and Philo the reference to reflection and explanation. Not only does public reading of Hebrew Bible take place, but there is an expectation of discussion and exposition. This reality explains why Jesus could so easily (at least in the beginning) enter the synagogues and speak to the assembly (Luke 4) during his public itinerant ministry. The practice of reciting a Law and then expounding on it gets repeated by Jesus most obviously in his "you have heard it said, but I say" pattern throughout the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7). When looking at the literary sources that describe the synagogue gathering from Josephus, Philo, Qumran, Luke, and Acts, Carl Mosser concludes, "the main activity in the Sabbath gathering after the reading of the Law and the Prophets was not a sermon, but open discussion among Jewish men. During this time, it appears that anyone could offer insights or dispute the interpretive claims of others."[99] This disputative posture when it comes to religious and national discussions clearly influenced Jesus's interactions with the Pharisees and other religious and national leaders. Halakhic arguments pepper the Gospel dialogues. Rhetoric—attempt at persuasion—through the debate and dialogue model took place in the synagogues of Jesus's day and account for his engagement in those same practices in his ministry.

To really drive home this point about disputative and questioning practices within Jesus's synagogue formation, one need not look further than his pre-pubescent years. Before Jesus went to prom, he spent time questioning and discussing the Torah with Jerusalem's religious leaders.

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[98]All translations of Philo follow Philo, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge, New Updated (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), here Philo, *Prob,* 81-82.

[99] Carl Mosser, "Torah Instruction, Discussion, and Prophecy in First-Century Synagogue," in *From Christian Origins and Hellenistic Judaism*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 550.

When looking at all four Gospels, one learns very little about Jesus's life prior to his baptism and public ministry—both events which took place in his adulthood. Interestingly, Luke includes a story that the other Gospel writers omit from his childhood. After traveling to Jerusalem from Nazareth to celebrate the Passover, Jesus's parents realize deep into the return trip that their boy is missing from the caravan.[100] After three nerve-wracking days, Mary and Jospeh find Jesus at the "temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and *asking them questions*" (Luke 2:46, emphasis mine).[101]

It is fun to think about all the things Jesus might have done as a child: play hide and seek with his siblings (even though his omniscience gave him an advantage), learn the carpentry craft from his earthly father (and cry out to his heavenly father when he accidentally hammered his thumb), and sing from the psalter (knowing Psalm 2 was actually about himself). Luke, and the rest of the Gospel authors, exclude any stories like these from his early years. Instead, the only story from Jesus's childhood presents him asking questions of religious leaders.

Does this moment in Jesus's childhood make him unique? Not exactly. Rather "the account the twelve-year-old in the Temple tells us not only that Jews were serious about educating their children, but they were also serious about listening to them. Children are not to be 'seen and not heard'; they are to be fully part of the family, and the community."[102] Jesus's

[100] While I would love to make a joke at their expense for forgetting the Son of God in Jerusalem, as an aunt I have learned to refrain from making jokes at any mother's expense about her parenting. I forget to feed my cat sometimes, assuming your son is among the extended family and friends hardly seems egregious. Also, the account shows that they suffered greatly at this moment. Mary and Joseph have been given an unbelievable privilege, but it comes with great suffering.

[101] Discussing this event Witherington and Levine note the agony expressed by Mary and Joseph in this incident. They comment, "The parents are sick with worry…She has been "searching" for him in great "pain" (the NRSV "anxiety" does not fully capture her emotional state, or the sword in her heart). She and Joseph, "your father," have suffered on his account." See Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 71.

[102] Levine and Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke*, 74.

Jewish upbringing taught him that question-asking played a part in religious formation. As already mentioned, the first words of any character in a story carry a great deal of significance. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus's first words are a gentle rebuke of his parents with a question for not understanding that his purpose demanded he participate in these types of discussions. In response to Mary's anguish, Jesus makes a:

> crucial remark about the necessity of his involvement with religious discussion like that at the temple. His sonship demanded it. Such self-understanding the parents could not comprehend, nor did they perceive as yet Jesus' total sense of priorities toward the things of the Father. Yet the event is but a foretaste of Jesus' later ministry.[103]

Luke includes this story as a hint of what would come of Jesus's public ministry life. From the beginning, Jesus saw question-asking as part of the formative practices of religious conversation.

So far, we have discussed the Greco-Roman and Jewish sources that influenced Jesus's rhetorical strategy preserved by the Gospel writers. When it comes to debate and religious dialogue, we can credit Sophists and the synagogue. Yet, some of Jesus's most penetrating questions do not involve two parties in a debate. Sometimes, Jesus, without debate or dialogue, asked open-ended questions to the crowds. Therefore, we must keep asking, "Where did he learn to ask good questions?"

Hebrew Bible as the Source

He got it from his dad. Question-asking to persuade, rebuke, invite, and elicit many other emotions happens throughout the Hebrew Bible. Before Matthew, we had Malachi and Moses. And the Hebrew Bible explodes with rhetoric meant "to carry away the audience; to produce an

[103] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1 - 9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament 3A (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 225.

effect on them; to leave them different as a result of the impact of the words."[104] If we step back and realize that God employs rhetoric in communicating to humanity we come to realize some important truths about his relationship to his image bearers.

God exhaled and suddenly the Milky Way, elephants, and narwhals existed. His speech creates. It also destroys. A whisper from God can crush a cedar (Ps 29:3). With so much majesty, power, and causation, God could speak definitively and force his will upon humanity.

Yet, the commands of God can be disobeyed. God restrains his power when he speaks to humanity. Instead, he welcomes humans into dialogue with him. This means, "when God seeks to appeal to His human addresses, He actually shares with them His concerns, expecting them to accept His authority in light of His reasoning in human dialectical terms and not just because he is God."[105]

God persuades through his rhetoric not his might. Although sometimes he does display his might, God draws humans into his desires through rhetoric. Take for example God's interaction with Cain prior to the fratricide (Gen 4). God could berate Cain for his anger, discipline Cain with no speech, or make Cain obey with a "Let there be goodness in Cain's motives" like he does for the boundaries of the sun and sea. Instead, God asks Cain a series of questions meant to persuade Cain to do good. Interestingly, God speaks to Cain and not Abel or even Cain's parents, "rather God chooses to speak to Cain, attempting to save him from the sin of fratricide that he is about to commit. He invites Cain to choose…".[106]

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[104] Yehoshua Gitay, "Biblical Rhetoric: The Art of Religious Dialogue," *Journal for Semitics* 18 (2008): 35.

[105] Gitay, "Biblical Rhetoric," 43.

[106] David W. Cotter, *Genesis*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2003), 42.

God attempts to sway Cain through language, giving him meaningful choice while tipping the scales toward the good. The series of questions here echoes the earlier scene where the snake asks Eve a series of questions. "In both cases the questioners know the answer to their own question, but whereas the snake's was designed to lead man into sin, God's were intended to provoke a change of heart."[107] Cain, tragically, ignores the scales and murders Abel—but the fact that both the tempter and God employed question-asking as a means to persuade their interlocutor shows the power of this rhetorical device. Although the story is horrifying, it reveals a pattern throughout the Scriptures—God uses questions to impact us.

One recurring design of question-asking in the Hebrew Bible is known as the *modus tollens,* which strengthens the question by denying the antecedent.[108] For example, "How could I love LeBron more than I already do?" This question works by denying the premise. The rhetorical thrust communicates I could not love LeBron more if I tried. When God asks Abraham and Sarah, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen 18:14) the question works by communicating that nothing is too hard for the Lord. It invites Abraham and Sarah to consider what they already know to be true about God's power. This type of question forces the listener to confront the false premise of their standpoint that the question-asker makes explicit. Abraham and Sarah doubted; God's question implicitly names the doubt and explicitly asks them to reconsider.[109]

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[107] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1 - 15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 104.

[108] Adina Moshavi, "Between Dialectic and Rhetoric: Rhetorical Questions Expressing Premises in Biblical Prose Argumentation," *Vestus Testamentum* 61, no. 1 (2015): 138. This rhetorical device is prevalent throughout the prose of the Hebrew Bible (Gen 18:14, 20:9, 30:2, 31:36, 34:31, 43:7, 50:19, Ex 3:11, 5:2, 16:7, Num 11:23, 16:11, 22:28, 38, Josh 22:24, Judg 9:28, 11:12, 18:23, 1 Sam 17:26, 18:18, 20:1, 22:14, 24:15, 25:10, 26:15, 18, 29:8, 2 Sam 7:18, 9:8, 16:10, 19:23, 1 Kgs 12:16, 17:18, 18:9, 2 Kgs 3:13, 5:7, 8:13, 18:25).

[109] We can see this same pattern in a number of places. For example, "Is there no God in Israel whose word you could seek?" (2 Kings 1:16) God rebukes Ahaziah for not seeking the word of God. The question shows there was a God and Ahaziah is at fault. Also, "Is there a limit to God's power?" (Num 11:23) After marching Israel out of

This begs the question, "what is accomplished by phrasing a premise indirectly in the form of a rhetorical question, when it could have been more straightforwardly expressed as a simple assertion. [sic] The answer lies in the strengthening effect of the rhetorical question. As compared to the equivalent declarative clause, the rhetorical question is more forceful."[110] I could simply say, "I love LeBron" which carries some declarative force. But, if I were to ask, "Is there a greater love than what I have for LeBron?" the listener intuits that I have ratcheted up the intensity of affection. Again, God intends to impact the listener with speech and employs rhetoric to do so. Could God be a better communicator?

God both uses questions to help others reconsider their perspective, and also, through the prophets, uses questions to bring accusation against the Israelites. Jeremiah especially employs rhetorical questions to highlight their foolishness. By asking 1) Is Israel a slave? (2:14); 2) Has God been a wilderness to Israel? (2:31); 3) Will God be angry forever? (3:5); and 4) When men fall, do they not rise again? (8:4) Jeremiah establishes a common base with the listener. However, he only creates a common base so he can flip it on the listeners. 1) If you are free, why are you now war booty?; 2) If God has treated you with abundance, why has he now abandoned you?; 3) If Yahweh is forgiving, why have you continued to do evil to endure his continued wrath?; 4) And, if one always returns to the path, why are you still lost in the sauce? (paraphrase, of course).[111]

Egypt through the Red Sea they have the audacity to complain about food. God's question forces Moses—and ultimately the Israelites—to consider God's power. If he can part the Red Sea, can he not also feed you?

[110] Moshavi, "Between Dialectic and Rhetoric," 147.

[111] Walter A. Brueggemann, "Jeremiah's Use of Rhetorical Questions," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, no. 3 (1973): 359-360.

For Jeremiah, the questions draw the listeners in by creating shared space. Once they agree upon the premise, the premise is flipped and becomes accusation. "Corrie, does Nika not always sneak you her pizza crust when the other roommates are not looking? Yes…then why would you steal from the hand that feeds?"

A line of questioning followed by accusation permeates the book of Jeremiah with the result that the rhetorical device is a "frontal attack on the entire religious enterprise and world-view of his contemporaries. Jeremiah is the one who sees exile as the inevitable result of this way of living and religion, and therefore his dispute is with the entire establishment which has misunderstood and presumed upon Yahweh."[112]

A full-frontal attack through question-asking certainly falls under rhetoric. The questions aim to wound, but wound so they may heal. God sends the prophets to speak for him. Jeremiah's questions, while harsh, speak to the seriousness of Israel's sin and inevitable exile. What would it sound like to try to wake up a nation ignoring God's commands?

So far, we have focused on asking questions that correct or rebuke. But God also uses questions to invite his people to express pain or anger. In the wilderness Hagar—slave to Sarah and Abraham—despairs of her life because of her mistreatment. God—although omniscient—asks Hagar where she has come from and where she is going.[113] This is the first time that God asks someone where they are since Genesis 4, and it is the first time Hagar's name, rather than

[112] Brueggemann, "Jeremiah's Use of Rhetorical Questions," 374.

[113] While there is robust debate over whether or not the Angel of the Lord is God or an angel, either way this question emanates from God or from his proxy which speaks on behalf of God. God, whether directly or through a mediary is speaking to Hagar. For in-depth discussion on Angel of the Lord see especially chapter 3 in Camilla Hélena von Heijne, "The Messenger of the Lord in Early Jewish Interpretations of Genesis," Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, Band 412 (Berlin, De Gruyter, 2010).

her status as a slave is used in the text.[114] God sees Hagar and blesses her, and the account, "is a beautiful story of God coming to the rescue of the marginalized and the social outcast."[115] "His question invites greater intimacy, not rebuke.[116] This tender scene between God and a runaway enslaved woman begins by a question that invites Hagar to share her pain with God.[117] "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?"[118] beckons, and as a result, Hagar experiences a God of tenderness, mercy, and generosity by responding to the question with telling God about her heartache. After this tender moment, God announces He will make Hagar the mother of a multitude—blessings reserved for the Patriarchs. Questions invite.

Questions also teach. If a person took a blue highlighter to all the questions of God in the Hebrew Bible, the end of Job would look like an ocean. The book of Job starts with a righteous man who—in a rather bizarre moment in Scripture—becomes the center of a wager between God and an accuser. Does Job worship and obey God because of the rewards or because Job actually loves God? To find out, the accuser puts Job through some of the most painful and grievous experiences one can imagine.

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[114] Tony Maalouf, "Hagar: God Names Adam, Hagar Names God," in *Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible*, ed. Sandra Glahn (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2017), 179.

[115] Maalouf, "Hagar: God Names Adam, Hagar Names God," 187.

[116] Wenham says of the incident, "When God sees, he cares." Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16 - 50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 11.

[117] The tenderness of this story is highlighted even more when you consider Hagar's lowly station in life. Judette Gallares writes about Hagar: "In the patriarchal world of the Bible, to be a woman meant to be an inferior human being; to be a foreigner meant to have no legal rights and to be discriminated against like the widows and orphans; and to be a slave meant to have neither freedom nor right to control ones' destiny. Thus to be a woman, a foreigner, and a slave all at the same time was a triple tragedy. . . . She was among the most humble, most afflicted, and most despised members of society." And yet, God invites this woman to share her pain and then blesses her with a great nation from her lineage. From Judette A. Gallares, *Images of Faith: Spirituality of Women in the Old Testament* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 7.

[118] Genesis 16:8, CSB.

At first, Job continues to declare his love of Yahweh, but then readers catch a glimpse of Job's inner dialogue: he curses the day he was born. Who could blame him? Then Job's buddies visit the suffering man and heap more misery upon him by accusing him of doing evil which brought about his suffering. Who needs enemies when you have friends like Job's? Job knows his own innocence, so in a moment of great pain and despair, Job accuses God of treating him unjustly and demands an answer for why his life has turned to ruin.

We need the blue highlighter for what follows. God answers Job with seventy-seven questions. At first glance, the questions might seem inconsiderate, if not cruel. Why are my children dead? Have you seen a Billy goat bah? Upon more meditation, though, God's questions invite Job to consider a bigger perspective. Francis Andersen, commenting on the "deluge of counter-questions" is worth quoting at length. He writes:

> The sustained interrogation is not just a formal peculiarity. The function of the questions needs to be properly understood. As a rhetorical device, a question can be another way of making a pronouncement, much favoured by orators. For Job, the questions in the Lord's speeches are not such roundabout statements of fact; they are invitations, suggestions about discoveries he will make as he tries to find his own answers. They are not catechetical, as if Job's knowledge is being tested. They are educative, in the true and original meaning of that term…Their initial effect of driving home to Job his ignorance is not intended to humiliate him. On the contrary the highest nobility of every person is to be thus enrolled by God himself in the school of Wisdom…For Job the exciting discoveries to which God leads him bring a giant advance in knowledge, *knowledge of himself and of God, for the two always go together in the Bible* (emphasis mine).[119]

Job wants answers; God offers questions. Rather than dismissing Job's questions, though, God's counter-questions teach Job of mysteries and knowledge beyond Job's reach. These questions gently nudge Job to consider that the reason behind suffering might be beyond the grasp of human understanding. The world God presents to Job in the questions has a complexity beyond

[119] Notice how Andersen agrees with Calvin that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self go hand in hand. Francis I. Andersen, *Job*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 14 (Lisle: InterVarsity, 2010), 269.

human comprehension which leads Job and the reader to realize, even if God answered Job, humanity would not understand. Some things are beyond our reach. Rather than God rebuking Job and saying, "you puny human, I have forgotten more about quarks than you will ever learn," God's questions invite Job (and the reader) into pondering God's wisdom. His questions turn human eyes to a world bigger and more majestic than we can comprehend. God might not have answered Job, but he does teach him. Questions instruct.

We could continue with examples from the Hebrew Bible, but the main point of this chapter is about the questions of Jesus. From all these sources we can draw a few conclusions things about Jesus's rhetorical use of question-asking in the Gospels. For starters, Jesus's question-asking proves very effective in his Hellenized context. A world that prioritizes rhetoric, means the rhetorical flair of Jesus allows him to hold court amongst the orators, annoying Juvenal. Yet, while Jesus would sway many with a worldview-disrupting message, he would most likely credit his Father, not philosophers for his particular style. The questions of Jesus continue the long tradition of God's rhetoric to sway, comfort, rebuke, and encourage. Jesus talks like his dad. Why don't we?

As mentioned earlier, one of the major factors in our identity formation is understanding that humanity bears God's image. Of course we should be like Jesus, and Jesus asks a lot of questions. This should compel us to ask more questions. But, should we not also ask more questions because we bear the image of a God we discover in the Hebrew Bible who asks a lot of questions? Do the questions of God in the Hebrew Bible compel us to ask more questions, too? If not, why not? Jesus gets it from his father, so should we.

Jesus Uses Rhetoric

Jesus—a human who lived in the first century—had at his disposal several rhetorical devices and strategies that Plato and Juvenal also used. His use of well-known rhetorical devices and strategies demonstrates that Jesus intended to persuade and impact others with his speech. However, growing up Jewish meant Jesus also understood the long tradition from the Hebrew Bible and practices of the synagogue. When looking at the questions Yahweh asks, Jesus looks a whole lot like his dad. Whether a person within ear shot of the Sermon on the Mount thought Jesus sounded like Socrates or Solomon, they undoubtedly thought he aimed to *do* something to his audience. The listener knows rhetoric when they hear it, and Jesus's particular style made him effective. Even those who flatly rejected his message, did so with anger and frustration—his speech had made its impact. For those who accepted his message, many left their careers and family to follow him. While more than rhetoric went into persuading a person to give up their entire lives to follow a poor man from Nazareth who claimed to be God, it still helped. Maybe rhetoric might help to still convince people today.

If Jesus asks questions, so should Christians. Furthermore, Christians should ask questions that have impact upon the listeners like Jesus's did. When we do so, we look a whole lot like the trinitarian God whose image we bear. With the advent of social media, television, radio, and the 24/7 onslaught of communication in our pockets, we would be wise to learn a few rhetorical strategies that aim to persuade. If Juvenal thought he had it bad in first-century Rome, he should swipe through TikTok for an hour. He might kiss the cobble stones near the newly built Colosseum in gratitude if he did.

Avoid manipulation, of course, but looking more like Jesus in our discipleship strategies might help aid in their effectiveness. In the next chapter we will look at a sample of Jesus's questions and how they impacted those around him.

CHAPTER 4

JESUS'S IDENTITY-FORMING QUESITONS: A SAMPLE OF EXAMPLE

If Jesus asks questions, so should Christians. Furthermore, Christians should ask questions that have impact upon the listeners like Jesus's did. Below we will consider a few questions Jesus asked and how the questions impacted the identity formation of the listener. We will see how the questions of Jesus help form the listeners' understanding of God, himself, and others.

Who is God?

Jesus's question of greatest importance was probably when he looked at his disciples and asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt 16:13–16, Mark 8:27–29, Luke 9:18–20). The impact of this question must have lingered, as all three Synoptic writers included this moment in their Gospels. Prior to asking the disciples this pointed question, Jesus asks more generally "What's the word on the street about me?" The responses included a who's who of prophets. But then the Greek intensifies with a contrastive *δε* and an emphatic *'υμει* providing a poignant "but y'all, who do y'all say that I am?"

With this question, "Jesus turns attention away from the general public with its casual contacts and its imperfect loyalty and understanding and asks how it was with the men who were his closest followers."[120] This question hangs in the air until Peter answers on behalf of the

[120] Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 385.

group—something he does often.[121] Peter's declaration that Jesus was in fact the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, reveals that for the disciples, they were wrestling with their understanding of Yahweh and the Messiah whom God said would come. Who is God? He might be standing in front of them wearing sandals and chewing on a piece of barley bread. This question plays a crucial role in the discipleship process not just for the original twelve, but for all subsequent disciples of Jesus. To truly follow Jesus, you must answer for yourself who he is. Is he a prophet? Is he a miracle worker? Or, is Jesus God? With this question, Jesus invites his disciples to come to grips with a reality they must have been wrestling with after the feedings, healings, teachings, and exorcisms. By asking, though, Jesus drives the wrestling to give way to declaration. Jesus's question shapes their understanding of God's identity—he walks with them through Galilee.

Throughout Jesus's public ministry, he heals people suffering from leprosy, blindness, lameness, hemorrhaging blood, and all sorts of conditions that not only cause physical suffering but social suffering.[122] Rather than simply healing the people, Jesus often asked them questions before alleviating their pain. These questions draw the recipient of the miracle into a great intimacy with Jesus.

Take for example Jesus encountering two blind men as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (9:27–31). The two men ask the "Son of David" to heal them. Jesus asks them in response, "Do you believe I can do this?" By using the title, "Son of David" the two men reveal that they believe Jesus to be the long-expected Messiah. Jesus's question, though, invites them to

[121] For a discussion of Peter as the leader of the disciples see Larry R. Helyer, *The Life and Witness of Peter* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 36-40.

[122] Illness in the first century was often equated with spiritual sickness See John 9 for an example of this thinking.

really consider—do they have faith that Jesus is more than a miracle worker—do you really believe I am the Messiah? Lots of people demanded a sign from Jesus, but "the prerequisite faith of these individuals distinguished them from the evil and adulterous generation that constantly demanded a sign to prove Jesus's claims only to persist in their rejection of him even after witnessing his amazing miracles."[123] The two men express their faith in Jesus, and he says their faith has healed them.

Jesus's question beckoned them to wrestle with their understanding of God's identity. The same question confronts readers of Matthew's Gospel today. When Jesus asked the two blind men his question, "he is implicitly asking us the same question or questions: Do you believe I am the Son of God? Do you believe that I have divine power? In short, do you believe that nothing is impossible with God? These are essential questions encountering Jesus in the Bible."[124] Jesus's miracles do not depend on the faith of the recipient. In fact, often in the face of doubt Jesus performs his greatest miracles, like rising from the dead. The questions Jesus posed to those who needed a miracle create opportunities to wrestle with our belief in God. They form us as they ask us to consider what we believe about Jesus and his Messianic claims.

Who am I?

Jesus not only calls his followers to wrestle with God's identity, but he also asks them to consider more deeply our own identities. My favorite question Jesus asks he directs at Peter after the resurrection. On a beach with fire crackling (John 21:15–14) Peter walks up to Jesus on the

[123] Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2022). 245.

[124] James SJ Martin, "Do You Believe That I Am Able to Do This?," in *What Did Jesus Ask? Christian Leaders Reflect on His Questions of Faith*, ed. Elizabeth Dias (New York: Time Inc., 2016), 20-21.

shore after jumping from the boat. He stands dripping near hot embers, and one wonders if they remind Peter of the ones he used to warm himself before he denied being a disciple of Jesus (John 18:15–18). From John's storytelling point of view, this is the first time Peter and Jesus speak to each other since the denial, death, and burial of Jesus. What must Peter have felt in this moment? Shame? Regret? Fear? Jesus looks Peter in the eyes and asks, "Simon, do you love me?" Peter says yes. Jesus asks again. Peter says yes. Jesus asks a third time. Peter replies, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

On the night of Jesus's death, "Peter did not acquit himself well on that occasion, denying three times that he was a disciple of Jesus. Jesus now gives him the opportunity to answer a different set of questions, a set equally aimed at testing his faithfulness to Jesus."[125] Peter denied Jesus three times, and Jesus asks for a recommitment three times. Disciples fail. Peter failed. Yet, Jesus uses these questions to give Peter an opportunity to renew his commitment and reshape his understanding of himself.

Peter sees the risen Christ sitting in front of him, and he knows he denied the savior that painful Friday night. But now the savior welcomes him back with questions that invite renewed intimacy. After the questions, the Lord asks Peter to feed Jesus's sheep and to "follow" after Jesus as a disciple would. These questions both restore Peter to Jesus, and give Jesus an opportunity to shape Peter's identity—not as the one who fell away, but as the one Jesus asks to shepherd others.

If you would have asked Peter while sitting on that boat unable to catch any fish, "Who are you, Peter?" you might have heard phrases like failure, lost, broken. After this question-and-

[125] Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 385.

answer session with Jesus, you would get a different answer. Peter, who are you? This answer includes words like restored, shepherd, disciple. The Lord's questions help Peter to reframe his relationship to Jesus. Yes, Peter denied him. Yet the final word is not rejection, but restoration. Jesus's questions shape our self-identities.

Jesus's most frequent question, "What do you want me to do for you?" confronts readers still today. If someone asks you, "Who are you?" they might learn about your occupation, family connections, or your Enneagram number. Answering "Who are you?" requires vulnerability, but we can easily sidestep the vulnerability by answering with data that pertains to what we do and who we belong to. It is like pulling up your house on Zillow and showing the outside and staged photos before you moved in. The unmade bed, couches covered in dog hair, and dirty dishes never get shown.

The question, "What do you want me to do for you?" demands that we discuss the dirty laundry. It penetrates to the deepest recesses of our hopes, pains, disappointments, and fears. "Who are you?" asks for descriptions, but "What do you want?" sneaks past the pristine picture we project into the world and invites us to name the most tender parts of ourselves.

Jesus asks this question of the mother of the Sons of Thunder and hears they want to sit at the right hand of Jesus. What do you want? Power. Jesus asks this question of the blind beggar. What do you want? Have pity on me, I want to see. This story of the blind beggar in both Mark and Luke occurs soon after Jesus is asked by the rich young ruler what he must do to enter heaven. The implicit question here, what do you want? Eternal life *and* be rich when I get there. The question "What do you want?":

> requires reflection, not a hasty response. Do we want to sit beside God in heaven in powerful domination over others, like the selfish male disciples did? Do we want eternal life as if it is our rightful inheritance, as if we deserve it, as if we are the great, worthy

> elite? Or do we recognize our poverty, brokenness, helplessness, and blindness—our need for God, our need for vision—and want simply to see again, to see God face-to-face?[126]

Jesus's question stops the hustle and bustle of life and demands we consider what we most want in life. Our answer to this question may reveal our identity or sometimes even our idols. If we asked every Christian we knew to take a moment and consider how they would respond if Jesus asked them, "What do you want me to do for you?" we would learn more about those people answering that one question than from an hour's worth of ice-breakers. Jesus's questions force us to wrestle with our own identity. Where do I hurt? What do I seek? What hinders me from following God? Jesus's questions help reveal and shape our identity.

Who Are Others?

One of the ways Jesus's questions impacted people is they counter enculturated consciousness.[127] In other words, his questions shape our deep seated, often unquestioned, views that we absorb during our formative years from our culture and traditions. Jesus's use of questions "sought to crack conventional thinking and move people toward kingdom ways of thinking; from thinking dominated by culture to a worldview centered on God."[128] If discipleship should form our identities, Jesus's questions help chisel away our former selves and fashion us into new-creation people.

New-creation people think differently about how to view our neighbors. Our enculturated consciousness often tells us the kind of people we should prioritize and the kinds we ignore.

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[126] Dear, *The Questions of Jesus*, 10.

[127] Lee Wanak, "Jesus' Questions," *ERT* 33, no. 2 (2009): 167.

[128] Wanak, "Jesus' Questions," 167.

Such ignoring or even distaining can happen on harmless levels—such as my disgust at the color burnt orange because Longhorns are not my people. I am a Sooner. Far too often, though, the unconscious beliefs we inherit bear far more insidious fruit such as xenophobia, misogyny, and racism. Jesus's questions take aim at those unquestioned discriminatory thoughts.

The Good Samaritan pericope highlights this phenomenon well. In one of Jesus's classic "answer a question with a question" moments, a teacher of the law asks about eternal life, and Jesus basically responds with, "You tell me." "Love God, love your neighbor" comes the retort. Jesus commends the man, but he never learned when to hold them and when to fold them. He goes for broke. "Who is my neighbor?" on the lips of the lawyer challenges Jesus's understanding of the Law.[129] Jesus's response takes aim at the enculturated consciousness of the lawyer and the listeners of this exchange. The Lawyer, "has in mind a particular definition of a neighbor that concurs with his sense of self-righteousness. In response, Jesus tells a parable that turns his question on its head and gets at the crux of the matter."[130]

If Jesus simply wanted to teach neighborliness, the hero of the story would be Jewish. Yet, the only person to do good in Jesus's parable was a Samaritan—half Jewish, half Gentile—a member of a people group who many Jews loved to despise. By starting with a priest, and then a Levite, then turning to a Samaritan, Jesus moved "from the top of religious respectability…down to the bottom of racial disrespectability, heightening the narrative tension."[131]

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[129] Jesus is not the only one who uses questions strategically. This lawyer does not ask Jesus because he wants to learn, rather, "he is asking Jesus what it means to be righteous, but behind that seemingly innocuous question is a test to see if Jesus can come up with the correct— and acceptable— answer to be considered a bona fide teacher." This question tests Jesus. See Diane G. Chen, *Luke: A New Covenant Commentary*, New Covenant Commentary Series, Luke (Eugene: Cascade, 2017), 151.

[130] Chen, *Luke*, 151.

[131] Chen, *Luke*, 154.

Jesus knows exactly what he is doing when he then turns the story back to the Lawyer. Which of these three was being a neighbor to this poor man? The question does more than teach neighborliness, it shapes his disciples understanding of the "other." Who is my neighbor takes on new dimensions that shape our understanding of the identity of others.

Jesus's question as recorded in Luke 10 clearly strikes a nerve with the expert of the Law. His response to Jesus, to evade saying "Samaritan" and instead offer "the merciful one," displays his disgust for the whole story. Luke, by including the narrative, wants to do more than simply re-tell a story about Jesus juking a law expert. Luke wants to impact the reader, too. Not only does Luke want this, but all four of the Gospel writers want this as well. They record the questions of Jesus which "function naturally in advancing the dialogue and in shaping characterizations. Rhetorically, however, they function to engage us, the readers or hearers, to cause us to evaluate our responses in light of the disciples in the Gospel, and to help us reflect on Jesus and his ministry as the good news."[132] The expert in the Law in the story of the Good Samaritan must deal with his feelings about Samaritans, but by including this story with its question, "Who is a true neighbor?" readers have to deal with our biases—whether ethnic, political, or religious. Defining one's neighbor shapes disciples through all the centuries.

Questions Have Impact

Above we looked at just a few questions of Jesus. Hundreds more in the Gospels deserve consideration. Several authors wrote books that focus entirely on the questions of Jesus.[133] Each

[132] Kathryn Vitalis Hoffman and Mark Vitalis Hoffman, "Question Marks and Turning Points: Following the Gospel of Mark to Surprising Places," *Word and World* 26, no. 1 (2006): 69. Admittedly the Hoffmans are discussing the questions in Mark, but their sentiments hold true across the synoptics.

[133] Copenhaver, *Jesus Is the Question*. Dear, *The Questions of Jesus*. Michael J. Buckley, *What Do You Seek? The Questions of Jesus as Challenge and Promise* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2016).

of the authors, testifies that meditating on the questions proved fruitful in their spiritual formation. John Dear wrote about sitting with the questions of Jesus: "the key in every instance is to hear what Jesus is asking, to feel the love with which he asks his question, to sit with his question and let it penetrate our hearts and minds. My hope is that you will let these great questions sink in, touch your heart, and lead you closer to God."[134] Elizabeth Dias wants readers to see how Jesus's "questions, like the parables, fly under our mental radar right in, 'dividing bones and marrow,' challenging us not just to answer but to ask why the question needed to be posed at all."[135] Martin Copenhaver discusses his church's small-group reading one hundred fifty questions of Jesus outside of their scriptural context and simply reflecting upon the questions. He remarked, "It was as if spending time with the questions, so central to Jesus' ministry, was a way to spend time with Jesus, and we wanted to linger there for a time. Not all of the questions are easy to hear, however. Jesus' questions have the power both to comfort and to challenge."[136]

Michael Buckley when reflecting on Jesus's question-asking habit, states the, "question may actually turn human beings reflexively back upon themselves—upon the experiences and commitments and beliefs that are taken to be there already but that cry out for understanding and meaning, upon a store of habits, convictions, data, decisions, and challenges."[137]

All of these authors spent considerable time and energy thinking about, researching, and writing about the questions of Jesus. They approached their projects from different angles and

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Elizabeth Dias, ed., *What Did Jesus Ask? Christian Leaders Reflect on His Questions of Faith* (New York: Time Books, 2015).

[134] Dear, *The Questions of Jesus*, 3-4.

[135] Dias, *What Did Jesus Ask?,* x.

[136] Copenhaver, *Jesus Is the Question*, 129.

[137] Buckley, *What Do You Seek?,* 7.

had different goals, but each of them reported that the questions of Jesus impacted them in significant ways. The questions brought them closer to God, challenged them, made them introspective, comforted them, and caused them to reconsider long-held commitments and beliefs. The questions of Jesus shape our identities.

With all this data, ignoring question-asking in the discipleship process is more than an oversight. It borders on malpractice. If the goal of discipleship is to form people into greater understanding of God, themselves, and others and the model for discipleship is Jesus, we need to ask more questions.

In the next chapter, we will discuss a project that aims to prove that questions form people and offers a reproducible model for other disciple makers.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT DESIGN:
DOES ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESITONS IMPACT IDENTITY FORMATION?

Jesus used questions as a rhetorical strategy to help shape the identity of his listeners, and the project described below aimed to mimic his practice. With the design of this project, I set out to answer a few questions: If Jesus asked questions that impacted his listeners, how might we duplicate this practice today? What would be the impact, if any, upon participants in an experiment that asked them to answer questions devoid of any teaching element, spiritual disciplines, or pastoral guidance? Can we ask questions that, by the mere asking of them, improve a person's relationship with God, herself, and others?

Admittedly, this experiment fails to completely replicate Jesus's model, as he used questions as part of storytelling, within conversations, while teaching, and during public speeches. Jesus asked questions organically within his rhetorical events or as the opportunity arose. This project extracts questions from typical conversation and forces the participants to answer without any other verbal context. While this means we might not fully imitate Jesus's practice, it does give us an advantage in this experiment. If we can isolate questions and look for any changes in the person's understanding of God, herself, and others, we can conclude that questions alone play a part in the discipleship process. The big driving question is simple: does asking questions impact identity formation? As you will see below, it does.

The Project Design

After advertising the opportunity at St Jude through Sunday morning announcements and the Instagram account, participants and I gathered at the church offices for an evening where I briefly lectured before explaining the design of the experiment. As I mentioned in the ministry context section, we started every class the same way by me asking, "What is the goal of all Christian instruction?" and the class responds "worship."[138] The attendees gathered into two groups and answered the question: If you could see God face to face right now, what is one thing you would thank him for? After that discussion they remained in their groups and then they answered the question "What is the best question you have ever been asked?" I wanted both to get them in a posture of worship and to think about how powerful questions can be in their own lives.

Next, I briefly exegeted Matthew 28:18–20 with the information found in Chapter 2 of this thesis. The main points I discussed were identity formation, baptism as identity formation, and the overemphasis on teaching to the neglect of other methods of discipleship. I admitted my own default method was to lecture instead of asking questions. I confessed that I forced myself to add questions and discussion into our gathering times rather than naturally gravitate in that direction. I contrasted the default model of teaching and lecturing in most churches to that of Jesus's methods found in the Gospels. I informed the class that while Jesus did have large sections of teaching, he also asks more than three hundred questions and answers only about three of them. This begged the question: Is Jesus the Riddler? (Enter sympathy laughs from my class.)

[138] Technically the first thing that happened was all participants filled out a survey when they walked into the classroom. I will discuss the survey in detail in the "Measuring Tools" section.

I then transitioned to the material found in Chapter 3 of this thesis: rhetorical strategy and impact. I explained how Jesus's questions acted upon the listener, and the question-answering part of Jesus's discipleship strategy interested me the most. I then highlighted and discussed three questions in the book of John. The following is a brief sketch of my comments:[139]

Let's look at a couple of examples of Jesus's questions in the book of John. I want us to think about what he's doing with the question—not so much what he's asking, but what he hopes to accomplish by asking that question.

The first words of Jesus in The Gospel of John (1:35–38) are a question. He asks his new followers, "What do you seek?" One commentor remarked it is as if Jesus asks, "What is it you are longing for?" Imagine yourself in the first century. You have been following John, and he very prophetically claims the Messiah is near. Then he tells you, "You see my cousin over there? He's the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world." So, now you decide to follow Jesus because he may or may not be the Messiah. Then he asks you, "What are you longing for?" So, let me ask you, What is he hoping to accomplish with that question? If Jesus turned to you right now and asked you, "What is it you long for?" how might that question impact you?

A little bit later in the Gospel of John (5:41–44) Jesus talks to a Pharisee. Now, if you have not been at St Jude, you might not have heard my teaching on the Pharisees. Despite what you probably have heard, they are, in fact, the good guys. Usually we read Pharisees and something in our brain stem goes "Boooo!," but you will have to trust me. They would have won the popular vote in their day. The Sadducees won the actual vote, because there was no vote. The

[139] This is a sketch of the teaching from a transcript of this video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugObO0XXlto. While this particular video takes place in my home the day after we had the live class (the camera stopped recording during the live class), it is a fairly accurate representation of my lecture the night before.

Sadducees were the elite in charge of the temple and they—like the Rockefellers or Bezos—do not have a good understanding of how the masses live. I know you are now thinking, "Why does Jesus spar with the Pharisees so much then?" The answer comes down to how to worship Yahweh and follow the Scriptures. Their problem is not because they are the bad guys. Their problem was that God is standing before them as the person of Jesus, and they reject him. John records in chapter 5 that Jesus asks the Pharisees about how they will see the truth, because they are busy chasing after a glory that does not come from God. In other words, Jesus asks them how can you possibly see the glory of God, because you are blinded by the lesser glory of the admiration of others? Never mind the irony that the glory of God stands before them in that very moment. Ask yourself, "What is Jesus doing with that question?" This question challenges the listener. While the Pharisees might bristle at first, the question gives them an opportunity to consider if, in fac,t they might care a little too much about the approval of the crowds.

Now if we fast forward to John 21, we get a glimpse into one of the most precious moments in the Scriptures. Peter denies Jesus thric,e and three times Peter is asked by Jesus, "Do you love me?" Imagine yourself on the shoreline as this moment unfolds. I like to imagine that Peter starts with his eyes down and averting Jesus's when the Lord asks him the first time. But by the end he looks into Jesus's face and says, "You know that I love you."

Again, I ask you, "What is Jesus doing by asking this question?" This is not just a question of factual "Hey, do you love me bro?" It is an invitation; it is a moment for vulnerability; it's a moment of restoration.

Jesus asks more than three hundred questions, and I would encourage you to go look at a few of them and ask yourself, "What is Jesus accomplishing with this question?" Rarely does Jesus ask a matter-of-fact question. He does something more with them. Which brings me to the

ultimate guiding question of my thesis: Should we, the church, be asking more and better questions?

After the very brief lecture (fewer than thirty minutes), I transitioned to explain the design of the project and expectations for the participants. The guidelines and suggestions were simple and designed to increase the potential success of the project. See Appendix A for the handout the participants received.

The first guideline asked that the individual choose a partner who "you experience joy in their presence and who you love (are attached to)."[140] In their book *The Other Half of Church*, the authors—one a literal brain scientist and the other a discipleship pastor—discuss the necessary components for spiritual growth. The book details how joy and attachment must be present for a person to change.[141] I defined joy as someone who delights in seeing you, and you delight in seeing them. Think of the person that you think brings you joy. Does their face and your face light up at seeing each other? If so, you have joy. As for love or attachment, I explained that they should choose a partner that they would not fear losing based on any answer they might give. Attachment means you trust that the bond of the relationship is secure, and conflict is something that you work through—not something that ends this relationship. If the person they wanted met both criteria, then they could choose them. While later this stipulation might be unnecessary, I wanted to stack the deck. I desired to give participants the best chance at honestly answering their questions, which might lead to positive identity formation. Naturally, I wanted to have a brain scientist in my corner.

[140] See guideline 1 of Appendix A.

[141] Michel Hendricks and Jim Wilder, *The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation* (Chicago: Moody, 2020).

After selecting their partner, the participants were given forty-five questions that fall under one of three categories. Yes, you guessed it: 1) Who Is God? 2) Who Am I? and 3) Who Are Others? See Appendix B for the list of questions. When writing them, I constructed open-ended questions, tried to invite imagination into the process, and recycled questions that have been helpful to me over the years in pastoral ministry. Some questions depended on vocabulary familiar to regular attenders of St Jude, and most assumed the person had a self-professed relationship with the triune God. In other words, these forty-five questions were written for St Jude, not a broad audience.

After receiving the questions, participants were instructed to ask each other all the questions and listen intently to the answers. While the partners were allowed to ask follow-up questions to the responses, I asked that they refrain from rebuking, correcting, or attempting to teach in response to an answer. This guideline accomplished two things. First, if after answering a question very vulnerably a person receives rebuke, this could teach her it is not safe to be honest and will prevent her from answering honestly in the future. Secondly, this will then skew the results of the experiment's impact. If we are measuring the impact of asking and answering questions, then we must prevent any teaching from happening so that we measure only one variable at a time. I put it succinctly, that "the goal is to ask and answer the questions honestly, *not* to change their mind."

After the two big stipulations—a trusted partner and no rogue teaching—I made suggestions for how I thought the process might best be done. I offered that asking a few questions a day for those who live together could be a good rhythm. Or, for those who do not live together to plan out several times to gather and go through chunks of questions that they decided to cover in advance. They were encouraged to consider if their partner was the type of person

who needed longer to think before answering and, if so, planning ahead. They were told they could ask questions in any order and from any category as long as they asked and answered all of them.

I then asked participants to take moments throughout the process to check in on how they felt during the exercises and to take note of any questions that surprised, discouraged, or encouraged them. Finally, they were told to feel free to chase any curiosities that came up because of this process. While they were prohibited from giving a book to their partner to read in response to their answers, they could certainly assign themselves a book if something inside of themselves triggered a desire to learn, change, or comfort. The participants were given sixty days to answer the forty-five questions. Then we reconvened at the church office to discuss the results.

Measuring Tools

When the class gathered for the first time, before the instruction began every participant was given a survey to address how they felt about their relationship to God, herself, and others/neighbors. Using a seven-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree to Strongly Agree), each person assessed how they felt about twelve statements. See Appendix C for the initial survey.

During the interim between the initial class time during which they received brief instruction and the guidelines and the reconvening to discuss results, I sent only one piece of communication to participants—two email reminders informing them we would gather again and instructing them to mark their calendars. I hoped these communications would ensure people remembered to do the assignment.

After the sixty days, the participants who returned for the second gathering completed the same survey in Appendix C in addition to six open-ended questions. They were not allowed to

see their previous surveys, so they were answering the new one blind. The open-ended questions were as follows:

- How was this experience for you?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Are there areas of growth you plan to pursue?
- What, if any, impact did this exercise have upon you?
- Would you recommend this process to someone else? Why or why not?
- What changes would you make?

After the participants filled out their surveys and responded to these questions, I gathered everyone into a circle to ask them to discuss the impact this exercise had on them. Several folks were unable to attend this second session, so I repeated this process with a group of four women at a coffee shop to make sure I was able to get their feedback as well. A total of twenty people filled out the initial survey and fourteen of those people filled out the final survey and participated in giving feedback.

I asked the following questions of both groups:

- How did you complete the project? Did you answer all at once, space them out, forget and then cram them in the end?
- What would you change to this process?
- What would you cut from this process?
- What did you like from this process and would keep?
- Would you recommend this to others?
- Any other feedback for me or suggestions?

Results:

Compliance:

All but one person completed the assignment using the guidelines I provided. While some answered the questions in large chunks, others spaced them out throughout the sixty days, and two brave souls answered all forty-five on a long road trip over Thanksgiving. The only person who did not select a partner and instead answered the questions by himself had the least change in his survey. With greater compliance came greater positive change in identity formation.

Likert Data:

On average, in seven of the twelve statements on the Likert scale, compliant participants improved their agreement by a point. Those statements include:

- I feel close to God.
- I feel that God loves me.
- I feel that God likes me.
- I like myself and enjoy time by myself.
- I love my neighbors well.
- I treat others the way they should be treated.
- I love God and my neighbor.

This shows that after sixty days between the surveys, with only the forty-five questions and no other formal theological training, participants who followed the guidelines for this experiment showed positive identity formation in how God views them, how they feel about themselves, and how they treat their neighbor. I want to really drive home this point. A person came to this

project in October. They might ranked themselves as a 2—agree that they feel like God loves them. Then, after answering forty-five questions—only fifteen of which pertain to God—they returned and said they were 1—strongly agree. Every single compliant participant improved by a whole point on this. Asking and answering questions helped the participants feel more loved by God. Questions impact.

Interestingly, the statements that received little change had to do with statements pertaining to the understanding of self and purpose. Participants on average showed no change in agreement on the following statements:

- I am confident in my spiritual gifts and how to use them.
- I know who I am, like who I am, and am who I am.
- I believe God has a purpose for my life.[142]

None of the participants, except for the non-compliant one, experienced less agreement on these statements. Either they remained the same or improved in their agreement on all twelve statements.[143] Every single person had an overall net positive improvement in their identity formation except for the non-compliant individual. This means every person could say that asking and answering questions in community impacted their relationship with God, themself, and others in a net positive way.

[142] In later iterations of this experiment, I might reverse engineer the questions under the heading of "Who am I?" to consider more about purpose and giftings.

[143] The non-compliant participant went through an event that brought about serious loss and grief during this experiment. Though his results show less agreement on the Likert scale, his open-ended responses are overwhelmingly positive and reflect a greater desire to continue asking these thought-provoking questions even as a personal discipline in his life.

Open-ended Data:

Below is a smattering of quotes from the open-ended section of the follow-up survey. I limited my selection below to those answers that demonstrate how this process impacted the person, positively or negatively.

- *How was this experience for you?*
    - Stressful.
    - We had lots of moments where we got to share laughter and tears in almost the same breath.
    - I found myself thinking about God, myself, and my relationship with God and others in a deeper, more exciting way.
    - In some ways very affirming and in other ways very convicting.
    - I was struck by God's personalized and intimate love for us.
- *Did anything surprise you?*
    - I was surprised by how much I realized God helped me and my conversation partner to overcome in life.
    - I was surprised by which questions ended up being harder to answer.
    - How little I had before this thought about big issues in life.
    - How many times I was brought to tears by these questions.
    - How many times I had forgotten or had not realized how much God had worked in my life.
    - How many times questions led to more questions.
- *Are there areas of growth you plan to pursue?*
    - I'm going to study the attributes of God and people in the Bible more deeply.

    - How to love others better.
    - Grow in my compassion for those dissimilar to me.
    - Love my neighbor better…it's easier to not see them and not feel guilty.
    - I want to go deeper with people.
- *What, if any, impact did this exercise have upon you?*
    - I marveled at what God has done in my life.
    - Made me realize how much God has changed me since my childhood.
    - Convicting when it forced me to look deeper inside.
    - Comforting.
    - Felt closer to my wife.
    - I feel more aware of the ways God has knit me together and how they reflect him.
    - I'm more proud of myself.
    - Reminded me of who I am before God.
    - I felt so seen and loved which impacted my day, my inner dialogue, and my prayer life in a recognizable way.
- *Would you recommend this process to someone else? Why or why not?*[144]
    - Yes, it brings structure to discussing life, values, faith, and relationships in a safe way.
    - Yes, but only if the person emphasizes that they are safe. The guidelines matter.
    - Yes! This process has given me more insight and language in how I love, who I love, and why I love.

[144] All participants said yes to this question.

    - Yes, I think it is important for everyone who claims to be a Christian to at least think about who God is, who they are, and who their neighbor is.
- *What changes would you make?*[145]
    - Really emphasize the part about doing it with someone you love and trust.
    - Offer additional resources or recommended resources for a follow-up with a for deeper study section. In other words, if I realize I do not know much about God the Father, what can I do in response to that?

So What?

Asking questions shapes a person. Asking good questions changes lives. Jesus showed us this two thousand years ago, and for those willing to ask and answer vulnerable questions, they may just find the way, the truth, and the life.

Every person who participated in this project and followed the instructions experienced an improvement in the way they believed God felt about themselves and their neighbor. While most people improved upon their understanding of themselves, more work needs to be done to improve the questions for greater formation on self-identity. Yet, if pastors recreated this experiment in their churches, they should not be surprised if people feel as if they love God a little more, believe God loves them a little more, like themselves a little more, know themselves a little better, and care for their neighbors a little better.

After the follow-up conversations with participants a few themes emerged that will impact how I teach or write about this project in the future. For starters, this worked. Questions

[145] Several wanted fewer questions or felt that the questions were repetitive. I did not list above because that was not an identity shaping answer. But, if a person were to re-create this experiment, I would recommend fewer and better questions. I plan to re-write them to reach a broader audience in my next iteration.

form our identities. While the forty-five questions need to be tweaked for a more general application—less St Jude-centric and less redundancy—they can be turned into a helpful tool for discipleship. Secondly, many participants want a follow-up to these questions. While this experiment limited the measurement to the impact on questions only, the natural follow-up would be to recreate this experiment with questions and resources for deeper study pertaining to theology.

Some wanted a journal to process the questions before discussing with their partners. This feedback led to many different applications of this product such as a journal, deck of cards, study guide, or resource to track responses over time. When I asked if participants would recommend the project to others, all enthusiastically said yes, but several people made a strong caveat. They stressed the need to answer the questions with a person one deeply trusts. The guideline that included joy and attachment was paramount for them.

While I believe the most effective use of the questions would be done in a safer context, some participants were just getting to know each other and found the exercise fruitful. Instead of limiting to such intimate conversation partners, I would simply encourage future participants to understand the benefit of a safe partner while also highlighting the potential for change in other relational contexts.

Furthermore, not every relationship can or should be unfiltered in responses. For example, if a parent chose to do this experiment with a child, while the child might share her deepest darkest fears, insecurities, hopes, and dreams, it would be inappropriate for a mother to do the same. So, while the questions can and should encourage deep, vulnerable sharing, they can also be a tool that invites honest, meaningful conversation without exposing our most tender parts. Wisdom and context will determine the depth of the responses.

Finally, if other ministers wished to replicate this project, a final "now what?" conversation with the participants would prove fruitful and wise. The questions created a desire for deeper study and more growth. Having a trained minister or disciple maker come alongside the participants and steward those desires toward helpful books, studies, sermons, spiritual disciplines, worship practices, or therapy would produce better formational fruit.

Questions are a tool for exploration, formation, and discipleship. But, they are only one tool in a vast toolbox. Using these questions in conjunction with others would be the wisest course of action.[146] Questions shape people. Christians should ask more genuine questions.

[146] If down the road I turn this project into a resource, I will also include the following resources and guidelines: list of mental health resources and crisis hotlines that users can refer to if needed, suggest users consult a trusted counselor, pastor, or other qualified professional to help process difficult emotions or beliefs, incorporate prompts that encourage users to pause, pray, or seek further guidance if they encounter a response that is troubling, and instructions on how to listen well.

CHAPTER 6

THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS
SO WHAT?

A Love for Millennials—Who am I?

I have a confession to make: I care little about rhetoric or ancient views of discipleship. Or, maybe I should say I care about them as much as I care about most of the things I studied in seminary—I love to learn, I love to grow. Studying rhetoric is fun like studying Pharisees or Strategic Field Theory. However, while I find these fascinating, I have much greater passion for studying hermeneutics, trinitarianism or LeBronics. Those are my true areas of interest. One might then ask, "Why did you write an entire thesis about it, then?"

I needed a trojan horse to talk about Millennials. *Time Magazine* once called my generation the "Me, Me, Me" generation.[147] An *Atlantic* article quipped, "We already know Millennials are the worst. But what is a Millennial?"[148]

My mom chose to deliver me in January of 1985, and her labor apparently was a very selfish decision on my part. Afterall, Millennials are the most selfish and entitled generation America has ever seen. So, I did the most natural thing a Millennial could do, I studied myself. Well, more accurately, I studied my generation.

When I first graduated with my master's, I noticed how often Millennials were disparaged in conversations about workplace difficulties and in the pews. Pastors complained

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[147] "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation," May 20, 2013, https://time.com/247/Millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/.

[148] l Philip Bump, "Here Is When Each Generation Begins and Ends, According to Facts," *The Atlantic* (blog), March 25, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/03/here-is-when-each-generation-begins-and-ends-according-to-facts/359589/.

that Millennials were too self-focused to be of any use in their congregations. Too much naval gazing and not enough nave praising.

When one Millennial dared to speak up about his struggles in the church through a blog post, he asked the church to love his generation and see them. He was shown the backdoor.[149] I love me. And, I love my friends, so I set out to find ways to minister to Millennials on our own turf. This led me to the definition of discipleship I currently use: Discipleship is identity formation which asks and answers Who is God? Who am I? Who are others? and How do those relate? The true secret sauce to this definition is the second question: Who am I? This question opens a world of possibility to minister to the Me generation.

I know my generation cares about ourselves because every couple of years I have to learn a new way of describing myself. When I was in college, Zuckerberg stole or invented Facebook. In the beginning only those with an .edu email address could register, and this allowed only my generation to start defining ourselves online. For the first time in history people had to ask, "Which photo should be my profile photo?" We had to answer questions about ourselves—our likes, relationship status, and faith tradition. We could "like" something others posted when prior to Facebook, we had to guess with microfacial features.

After I graduated from college, BuzzFeed started putting out quizzes—"Which Friends character are you?" "Which Avenger are you?" "Which position in Quidditch would you play?" In seminary at Dallas Theological, I took a quiz titled "Which disciple are you?" I got Peter, so I retook the quiz until I got John and posted it to my Facebook page. After seminary, I had to figure out which four letters defined me . . . INTJ, ESFP, QRST, or whatever those Meyers-

[149] Darrell L. Bock et al., "Millennials Leaving the Church," accessed February 24, 2025, https://hendrickscenter.dts.edu/podcast/Millennials-leaving-church-classic/.

Briggs letters were. I always thought that test was a little nutty and recently heard a sociologist describe the Meyers Briggs as asking people, "Do you prefer earrings or shoestrings?"[150] He said there is absolutely no social science data to back up that the Meyers-Briggs is a good indicator of behavior or personality.

And yet, in the spring of 2025 a comedian at a stand-up show in Dallas used the Meyers-Briggs as part of her set. After the four letters came the singular number. If you would have asked me ten years ago, "What number are you?," I would have said clearly I am number one, I am a Millennial.

However, if you look at the Enneagram, I am the furthest thing from a one. Enneagram fervor seems to be settling, but now my niece lets me know when I do something that is "so Capricorn." I could keep going . . . StrengthsFinder, the Big 5, DiSC, etc. Millennial culture infiltrated corporate practices, too. In 2019, personality testing was now "a $500 million industry, with growth rates estimated at 10 to 15 percent annually, and appeal to consulting firms, hedge funds and start-ups alike."[151] The selfish generation got to the Fortune 500s. If you want to know who you are, there is a test for you, and probably a free one online. Millennials want to know themselves.

But, do you want to know what I noticed over the years? Maybe Millennials stand at the headwaters of this desire to know ourselves, but every other generation seems to have jumped into the stream, too. Rather than meeting this historical moment and deep-seated desire to know oneself, pastors and church leaders far too often rebuke the quest as selfish and unbefitting for

[150] David Brooks, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen* (New York: Random House, 2023), 178.

[151] Emma Goldberg, "Personality Tests Are the Astrology of the Office," *The New York Times*, September 17, 2019, sec. Style, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/style/personality-tests-office.html.

Christians. I have heard Christian thought leaders rail against the Enneagram because of its murky origins but fail to ask why this tool has so enraptured so many people. Why? Why do we insist on shaming and rebuking when we could invite and ask questions? Rather than dismiss this seemingly innate desire to know oneself, pastors would do well to realize this question—"Who am I?"—might be the very question that leads a person to the face of God. Instead of redirecting the question, we should encourage people to look harder. If the Bible is right, Calvin is right, and I am right, then the knowledge of self will eventually lead people to looking into the face of a loving and saving God.

If people want to ask and answer, "Who am I?" shouldn't the church be the place most ready and willing to help with that pursuit? We believe people are the image of God. We believe people receive gifts from the Spirit meant to be used for the building up of the body. We believe people are part of a body that works together, and if any part suffers the whole body suffers. Would that information not be helpful and formative for any person searching for who they are?

In my questions (see Appendix B) people have a chance to ask the abovementioned questions in ways that encourage deeper analysis than that provided in a BuzzFeed article. Participants must ask and answer, "What passages of Scripture help form your identity?" This question does not rebuke the Enneagram but forces the person to go deeper. If someone has been searching for knowledge of herself and she comes to realize she is an Enneagram 2, then passages on service and sacrifice will help her see how her life could be conformed to Christ's image. The 2s also come to serve and not be served.

Maybe an Enneagram 3 answers this question and she comes to realize she has been waiting her whole life to be told to let her light shine before others *so that* people may see her good deeds and glorify her God. Performance for proselytizing is a 3s dream. As people dive

more deeply into their knowledge of self, the 2-ness and the 3-ness falls away and Christ remains. But, their 2-ness and 3-ness are like handmaidens leading them to the face of God. Just ask an Enneagram 8 how she feels about Jesus flipping tables. She sees justice, and herself.

Participants in my project also ask and answer, "What unique qualities and traits did God give you that you are grateful for?" This question brings to the surface what all Millennials already know—we are special, each one of us. Look, before any Baby Boomers or Gen X roll their eyes and say this is typical Millennial hooey phooey born out of our coddled, entitled upbrings, I must ask, who gave us all the participation trophies? You created us, now you have to mentor us.

The question about uniqueness, though, finds its answer not only in our lived experiences but in the Scriptures. God knit me, which means "he is the author of every detail of my being."[152] What makes me unique? Let me ask God. These questions both satisfy the longing to know ourselves and force us to contend with the truest thing about us—we are the image of God.

As a Millennial, I had childhood relics that consisted of thick plastic cases for the Disney VHS tapes. I go to therapy like every other Millennial to work through the trauma of the Fox and Hound saying goodbye and Scar hurling his brother into the stampede. In the Lion King, Simba wrestles with his own identity throughout much of the movie. Who am I? Am I the runaway murderer my uncle suggested to me or am I the rightful King of Pride Rock who needs to come lead my people to freedom, like Moses? When Rafiki the wise primate tells Simba to look into the water, Simba takes a passing glance. Then Rafiki grabs the lion's head and forces him to look again and commands, "Look harder." The water transforms and Simba sees his father looking back at him.

[152] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, Kidner Classic Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014), 465.

When Lion King first hit theaters, evangelicals protested and boycotted it. They were worried the pagan themes would corrupt their children. Maybe someone should have grabbed their heads and told them to look harder. Even if they miss the clear gospel messages throughout the movie, Simba's experience mirrors so many. We have past trauma, competing identities, broken relationships, and the search for our purpose in life. Rather than look away from ourselves, we should look even more deeply. We will see our father looking back at us, too.

For the love of Millennials and for the love of humanity, please, allow people to ask, "Who am I?" This question plays an integral role in the discipleship process. If we stop rebuking this pursuit and instead see it as a holy pilgrimage, we might find Millennials and others more willing to stay in the pews. Who am I? The answer to that question is nothing short of the child of God, made in his image, endowed with dignity, worthy of honor, welcomed to the table, and, if willing, filled with God's Spirit that empowers you to change the world. If the Enneagram, my set of questions, or a Brene Brown podcast brings you to this conclusion, praise be to God.

A Love of Karens—Who Are Others?

I know if I turn on the news, I will see some talking head trying to convince me that DEI initiatives are not in my best interest, Nazi-ism is a viable position for the AfD in Germany, and immigrants might steal my Social Security. These are the tamer things I might hear. If I open Facebook, I will inevitably see that many older saints have continued their practice since the 2016 election of reposting lies and unchecked gobbledygook. If I open Instagram, some angry white pastor or Vice-President might try to convince me that empathy and compassion are tools of the woke agenda and Christians should not give into this leftish propaganda. Christian

nationalism, pretending to be faithful, shoved its stars and stripes down the throats of too many Americans. The love of neighbor has become a shibboleth for partisan politics.

If discipleship is about formation centered on the identity of God, oneself, and our neighbor, then the white, evangelical American church has utterly failed to disciple our own. Asking and answering, "Who is my neighbor and what do I owe them?" has not been ignored. It has had a chainsaw taken to it and now looks like the remainder of Saul's mail-ordered oxen (1 Sam 11:7). How do we get back some of those saints who have no media literacy training and believe the lies of Q-anon and cable news channels? Confrontation does not seem to work—that is because we are fighting what we think is a fire with a hose, when in fact these saints are drowning in loneliness.

The Covid pandemic drove people to the internet and television screens in a time of uncertainty and isolation. The rise of Christian nationalism corresponded with people needing to touch more grass and fewer keys. The deep loneliness experienced by them made them easy targets for conspiracy theories and group identity.[153] Do some of the more entrenched Christian nationalists spew hate, racism, misogyny, and xenophobia at others? Yes. Should they be rebuked? Most ardently. Do they spew hatred and nonsense to belong to a group because deep down inside what drives them is not hatred but fear and loneliness? So it seems.

In an article that asked Trump supporters why they come to so many Trump rallies, they answered that it was not about the man or his politics, but about comradery and fellowship.[154]

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[153] Damiano Terenzi et al., "Psychotic-like Experiences in the Lonely Predict Conspiratorial Beliefs and Are Associated with the Diet during COVID-19," *Frontiers in Nutrition* 9 (October 28, 2022): 1006043, https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2022.1006043.

[154] The Christian Science Monitor asked several attendees why they travel each weekend to hear the same old stump speech. They reported, "The experience is about more than politics, or even Mr. Trump himself. Attendees say the rallies – while condemned by Trump critics as displays of intolerance and hate – are really all about fellowship and camaraderie. It's like tailgating before the Big Game, but so much more – a multiday sleepover that, for participants, blends passionate allegiance to a cause with a sense of connectedness that's increasingly rare in

How many churches in America have "fellowship" in their name that rallygoers pass on their way to don the red hats? Can we get them back? I sure hope so. What if they could walk into their churches and be asked questions about themselves and enjoy fellowship and comradery while they did so?

It is not just the older folks who suffer with immense loneliness. We are all suffering under an epidemic of loneliness which is driving people into depression, anxiety, and suicide. I have spent nearly two decades thinking about how to combat this phenomenon. Researchers are trying to sound the alarm. Harvard's Graduate School of Education conducted a study on loneliness in the post-Covid 19 pandemic era. They found in that study, 61 percent of young people (18–25) and 51 percent of mothers with young children report miserable degrees of loneliness.[155] In this case, misery would quite literally love some company.

Yet a pandemic of loneliness started before Covid, so any naïve thoughts that we might bounce back someday should be dismissed outright. In 2018, Cigna—a health insurance company—partnered in research with UCLA and discovered that 1 in 4 Americans "rarely or never feel as though there are people that really understand" them.[156] Perhaps most surprisingly, despite all the technological wizardry and opportunity available to them, Gen Z (born 1997–2012) reported the highest levels of loneliness compared to Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and

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modern life." Story Hinckley, "These Superfans Travel Miles to See Donald Trump – and Each Other," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 8, 2019, https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2019/1029/These-superfans-travel-miles-to-see-Donald-Trump-and-each-other.

[155] Richard Weissbourd et al., "How the Pandemic Has Deepened an Epidemic of Loneliness and What We Can Do About It," *Making Caring Common Project*, n.d., https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b7c56e255b02c683659fe43/t/6021776bdd04957c4557c212/1612805995893/Loneliness+in+America+2021_02_08_FINAL.pdf.

[156] Cigna, "Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index," https://www.cigna.com/static/www-cigna-com/docs/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combatting-loneliness/loneliness-survey-2018-infographic.pdf.

even the Greatest Generation.[157] Insurance companies study loneliness because it impacts their bottom dollar. Loneliness is as detrimental to a person's health as smoking cigarettes. Churches should study it, because we believe people are inherently precious. Cigna should not care more than pastors.

My family felt the devastating effects of suicide a few years ago. Most books on grief say that when someone faces tragedy, often they begin the meaning-making process afterwards. How can I turn this tragedy into something productive? I am gutted at the thought of people feeling helpless and alone. For this reason, I started affinity clubs at our church a couple of years ago—clubs for people who quilt, play board games, read books, and like walks. Ten years ago, I would have said that was silly, that people can find friendships outside of church. The church's time and resources are for theology and Bible study. Now, I would commend any effort a church makes to help people feel less alone. Bunco and Bible, both are necessary.

Churches should be the place where the lonely find relationships. Covid makes for a nice boogey man, but the pandemic only intensified a trend already occurring. People do not feel connected at their churches, so they look elsewhere. What if people knew they could come to church and be given a partner and a set of questions to explore God, themselves, and their neighbor? What if part of identity formation is helping people to understand they need others, and others need them? What if they were forced, like the lawyer who asked Jesus about the greatest command, to wrestle with who their neighbor might actually be? What if someone asked them questions about themselves and really listened? What if they realized that what they have to say does matter, but not because it's full of hate and loud and joining a chorus of other screechers but because out of the mouth flows the overflow of the heart. And what if by having to say this

out loud to a person who is looking them in the eyes and seeing them as they are causes them to reconsider that what they are saying? What if this causes them to get off Facebook and start serving others, who they once despised? These are a lot of what ifs. Cynicism says such people might be hopelessly entrenched, but I am a Millennial. I might be hopelessly selfish, but I stubbornly think I can change the world. Why not try?

Creating cultures in our churches where people are encouraged and welcomed to ask and answer questions both invites the lonely into relationship, and it invites those filled with hate to say it to my face. I have found that those who spew hate from a place of loneliness rather than vitriol lack the courage in face-to-face moments that their keyboard and screen afford them. Incarnational ministry provides a healthy antidote to the epidemic of loneliness. It might just be the one vaccine some people are willing to take.

For the Love of My Babies—A Curiosity Culture

The greatest gift God has given me besides eternal life is the privilege of being an aunt. I love my babies with every fiber of my being. There are not enough superlatives in the English language to describe my love and delight in Jayden, Nixon, and AJ. One of my favorite things about being their aunt is that they ask me a lot of questions. I mean, a lot. The other day my nephew asked me if I ever yelled at my roommates. I told him only when they deserve it.

My nieces and nephew ask me about God and nature and travel and heaven and death and food and why I don't have a husband.

I see in them the best of humanity. And there are days when I weep over the world they will have to endure. I hate that I know what the world will do to their curiosity and innocence. As their aunt I try to reward their curiosity as often as possible. I take the 10pm FaceTimes to

discuss poetry and say, “I don’t know” when they ask something beyond my reach. My deep desire for them is that they will encounter God as a loving deity who delights in them and that they will stay curious the rest of their lives. If I can reward their curiosity enough right now, then maybe the first time they are rebuked or rebuffed for their questions, they will think the other person is defective rather than something being wrong with themselves. Asking questions is normal and good; shutting them down is sus and skibidi Ohio.[158]

I am only one person, though. While I think my influence in their lives is outsized in a good way, they will have school teachers, Sunday School leaders, mentors, and coaches who also play a part in their formation. For the love of Jayden, Nixon, and AJ, please, with all the sincerity I can muster, create ministries where curiosity is rewarded. I want them to be uncomfortable when they read Deuteronomy 7 and the *herem* commands. I want them to ask, “Is this good?” when they encounter those passages. I want them to ask, “Who am I?” when they are planning college and careers. Rather than being rebuked for asking, I want them to be encouraged to look harder. And I want them to ask, “Who is my neighbor?” and be challenged to love those who look, sound, and act differently than them. I want this for them, and for every niece and nephew who has ever lived.

I own two cats. Curiosity has never come close to killing them. All it has ever done is make them cuter and better material for Instagram. If Clive and Cate’s curiosity makes them cuter, how much more so humanity’s quest for answers? The discipleship tool in this project is meant to form people into greater lovers of God, themselves, and neighbor. If it does that, then I am fulfilling my calling as a scholar and teacher. If it goes one step further and helps create

[158] Generation Alpha’s way of saying suspicious and weird/bad.

cultures of curiosity, I am fulfilling my calling as an aunt. Jayden, Nixon, and AJ deserve nothing less, and neither do your babies.

For the Love of God—Who is God?

When I first started teaching my definition of discipleship as identity formation asking and answering, Who is God?, Who am I? Who are others?, and How do these relate? I would tell people I am convinced of this because the Bible tells me so. I believe it pleases God to engage in this process, because God seems to go to great lengths to tell us the answers to these questions. I would challenge a person to take three highlighters and mark the Bible each time God is communicating something about himself, ourselves, or how we are to treat others. You would be hard pressed to find a page without any color. Take Genesis 1 for instance. While the creation story at first glance seems to be answering the question, "How was it all made?" or if you are a fundamentalist, "In how many literal days was it made?," at a second glance it answers a different set of questions. Instead, it answers "Who made it?" and "How did he make it?" and "What's the relationship of the things he made?"

Who is God? The creator and sustainer of life who makes things good. Then, before you leave the chapter, God tells readers that he made humanity in his image—male and female. Who am I? The image of God. And he tells us something about our nature—it is not good for us to be alone. Who are others? Necessary for my flourishing. Page 1 of the Bible substantiates my thesis, and there are a lot more pages to go. Flip to the Sermon on the Mount. Who is God? The one who hears our prayers and desires to bring his kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. Who am I? The salt of the earth and light of the world. Who are others? Those I am supposed to treat as I would treat myself.

Perhaps God answers these questions in his Word because he set these questions in our hearts. Maybe our hearts desire to know a God beyond ourselves, and longs to plumb the depths within ourselves, and hopes to see in our neighbor a soul worth knowing and protecting because that is what it means to be the image of God. God answers these questions in his Word because he knows we will eventually ask. My roommates anticipate my questions before I ask them all the time. As a creature of habit, I make it easy for them. Their ability to say "yes, in the fridge" before I ask about the pickled jalapenos on hamburger night shows they not only know me but also love me.

God does a little better with bigger questions. If the whole of Scripture and life boils down to love God and love others, perhaps one way to show God and others that we love them is to stay curious about them. We can demonstrate our love for God and others by asking and answering questions with and about them. For the love of God, ask more questions.

Appendix A

Guidelines for Project

10/2/24

Dear Ones,

Thank you for being a part of this experience. I am really hopeful it will be a helpful and revealing time for each of you. Below are the guidelines and suggestions for making the most of this time. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions: ###-###-####.[159]

Guidelines and Suggestions:

1. Choose a partner who you experience joy in their presence and who you love (are attached to).
2. Fill out the questionnaire to show how you're doing. I am looking for changes, so please do not feel like there are "right" answers to any of these questions. This is a time for you to be honest with yourself.
3. Ask each other all of the questions. Listen intently to the answer, and feel free to ask follow-up or clarifying questions. BUT, do NOT rebuke, correct, or attempt to teach a different response.
4. The goal is to ask and answer the questions honestly, NOT to change their mind.
5. Asking 1 to 2 questions a day would be a good rhythm or putting aside time each week to ask several at once. But, you want room and space to be able to think and respond honestly. So, be intentional about when and how often you ask the questions.

[159] Redacted for privacy.

6. Take note of how you feel during this process or maybe an answer or two that surprised you, discouraged you, or encouraged you.
7. Feel free to ask questions from any category and in any order. Just make sure you get through them all.
8. You might consider 15 different sessions and you ask one question from each category at this time.
9. When you finish, come back and fill out the same survey and some additional questions.
10. Give me any feedback you have on the process.
11. Chase any curiosities that come up as a result of this process.

We will gather again on Dec 4th at 7pm at the offices. If you cannot make it, please email me so I can send you the final survey and get your feedback.

Appendix B:

Discipleship Questions

Nika's DMin Thesis

Who is God?

1) What comes to mind when you hear God the Father? How does it make you feel?
2) What comes to mind when you hear God the Son? How does it make you feel?
3) What comes to mind when you hear God the Spirit? How does it make you feel?
4) How would you describe God to a fellow Christian? What about a non-Christian?
5) What passages about or attributes of God comfort you? Why?
6) What passages about God make you uncomfortable? Why?
7) God tells us he is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Is this how you experience God?
8) What does it reveal about God that he is triune–3 persons, 1 essence? What, if anything, does this mean to you?
9) The Bible tells us "God is love," what does this mean to you? How do you experience God's love?
10) Have you ever had an experience in life where you felt God's nearness? Describe this experience.
11) Have there been seasons when God feels far? What was that like?
12) When you think of God, what images come to mind? Why?
13) What do you sometimes wonder about concerning God?
14) If you could ask God anything, what would you ask the triune?
15) What do you wish was different about your relationship with God? What do you enjoy about your relationship with God?

Who am I?

1) What do you think God thinks about you? How does he feel toward you?
2) When is it most challenging for you to approach God?
3) What passages of Scripture help form your identity?

4) What spiritual gifts has God given you? How do you think God intends for you to use them?

5) What rhythms in your life are forming you into greater conformity to Christ?

6) What rhythms are malforming you away from God's best for you?

7) When you pray, what are you imagining God is doing? How do you think he feels about you?

8) What unique qualities and traits did God give you that you are grateful for?

9) What parts of your past do you struggle to believe God has truly forgiven you? What might God say to you if you were to talk about it face to face?

10) You are made in the image of God. What does this mean to you?

11) How have you seen yourself change into greater Christlikeness? In what areas would you like to see more growth?

12) God wants to be with you forever, how does that make you feel?

13) What people have helped shape you positively? What did they do or say that had the biggest impact?

14) What person from the Scriptures do you most admire? Why? How might they be an example to you?

15) If you believed what God thought about you, how would your life change?

Who are others?

1) When you hear the word "neighbor" what comes to mind?

2) Are there people or groups of people difficult for you to love? Why?

3) When is it hard for you to forgive others?

4) How might God have uniquely gifted you to love and serve others well?

5) Describe a time when someone wept with you and a time when someone rejoiced with you.

6) Describe a time when you wept with someone and rejoiced for them.

7) When is it hardest to celebrate good in another person's life?

8) Is there someone God is calling you to love better and you are avoiding it? What is one step you can take to move in that direction?

9) How would you want others to describe you? In what ways are those descriptions true and in what ways do you need to grow?

10) Who are the people in your life you would like to love really well? What's one rhythm that you can implement to help with that?

11) Everyone is made in the image of God. What does this mean to you?

12) God especially cares for the vulnerable. How do you do this also?

13) If the whole of Scripture boils down to love of God and love of neighbor, why is this so hard for us at times?

14) What kind of friend do you want to be for others? How could you be more like that?

15) How does God feel about your enemy? How might you find a way to love them?

Appendix C:
Initial Survey for Participants

Name:

Asking Better Questions

		Strongly Disagree (7).	Disagree (6)	Somewhat Disagree (5)	Neutral (4)	Somewhat Agree (3)	Agree (2)	Strongly Agree (1)
1.	I feel close to God.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
2.	I feel that God loves me.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
3.	I feel that God likes me.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
4.	I trust God.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
5.	I love God.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
6.	I like myself and enjoy time by myself.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
7.	I am confident in my spiritual gifts and how to use them.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
8.	I know who I am, like who I am, and am who I am.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
9.	I believe God has a purpose for my life.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
10.	I love my neighbors well.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
11.	I treat others the way they should be treated.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
12.	I love God and my neighbor.	(7)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)

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