

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

Shared words do not always mean shared meaning.

Something I have learned from hundreds and hundreds of conversations in the harvest is surprisingly simple: before discussing what someone believes, I need to understand what they mean.

We use words every day that seem obvious to us: love, truth, respect, freedom, faith, God, church, Christian, sin, acceptance. We assume we know what those words mean. Even more dangerous, we assume we know what someone else means when they use them.

But words carry stories.

Our definitions are shaped by our families, cultures, relationships, experiences, disappointments, pain, beliefs, and the people we have encountered along the way. Two people can use exactly the same word while talking about two very different things.

Someone says, *"Love is love."*

It would be easy for me to hear those words, decide what I think they mean, and begin responding. But I have learned to ask a different question: *"What does love mean to you?"* Or even more simply, *"What do you mean by that?"*

That question has opened some remarkable conversations because now I am no longer responding to my interpretation of their words. I am listening to the person behind them. Their answer may reveal something I never would have discovered if I had immediately started explaining my own definition. It may reveal a relationship, an experience, a disappointment, a value, a wound, a hope, or a question they have been carrying for years.

That is why definitions matter.

If I am using the word love to mean one thing and you are using love to mean something else, we can spend an hour debating love without ever actually talking to each other.

One of my favorite examples happens when someone tells me, *"I don't believe in God."* Instead of trying to convince them that God exists, I like to respond, *"Tell me about the God you don't believe in."*

I have heard some fascinating answers to that question. Sometimes the God they describe is angry, distant, controlling, judgmental, impossible to please, or completely uninterested in their life. Sometimes their understanding of God has been shaped by a painful experience with religion or by people who claimed to represent Him. And sometimes, as I listen, I find myself thinking, *I don't believe in that God either.*



Now we are having a very different conversation. Instead of debating whether God exists, I am discovering who they think God is. And that gives me an opportunity to listen to their story before I ever tell them mine.

The same is true of words like church and Christianity.

Ask someone who has been hurt by the church what they mean when they say church.

Ask someone who rejects Christianity what they believe Christianity is.

Ask someone who says something is wrong what makes something right or wrong to them.

Before explaining, defining, defending, or correcting, get curious. *“Tell me what you mean by that.”*

This isn’t a clever conversational technique.

It is an expression of value. I am telling another person that I care enough about what they think to resist assuming I already understand them. I would rather hear their definition than impose mine upon them.

And that is where *Holy Curiosity* enters the conversation. Holy Curiosity seeks to understand. It listens for more than words. It listens for the experiences beneath the words. It notices clues. It asks another question. It allows someone to finish their thought before preparing a response.

Sometimes the most important thing someone tells us isn’t what they believe. It is why that word means what it means to them. That is *Kingdom Reconnaissance*. We are learning the language of the person sitting in front of us.

Once we understand their language, we may discover entirely new ways to talk about Jesus that actually make sense to them. So the next time someone uses a word that immediately makes you want to respond, resist the urge to define it for them. Get curious. Ask one more question: *“What do you mean by that?”*

Then listen. Their answer may tell you far more than the word ever could.