

This is why . . .

by [Scott Alan Johnson](#)

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First, you get a question. “What is God's will for my life?” or “Are my parents really in purgatory” or “What about babies who die before they are baptized?” or “What about all those people who lived before Jesus was born?” or any one of a number of questions you get when you wear the funny shirt with the little white tab in the middle.

Even though you’ve heard it before, the person asking you is asking for the first time. You want to honor their seeking and respect them for coming to you and exposing a spiritual frailty, particularly in a culture that despises uncertainty and multivalence as ours does. There’s a voice in your head that is screaming at you to give them the “right” answer—but that won't respect the question. That won't honor the pursuit of wisdom. In the words of a popular cliché, that's giving them a fish, not *teaching* them to fish.

So even though there’s a part of you that's dying to trample all over the terrible question and all the bad answers people have given over the years, you hold back. You shut up. You gently turn it around and let them have the question to ponder. You wait, hoping, praying.

Then, sometimes the next day, sometimes months later, sometimes years later, they answer the question. They have listened and prayed and thought and prayed and wrestled and read and prayed and pondered and prayed some more. Sometimes they answer the question in a way you never would have done. You wonder if they've heard a word you’ve said in all the time you've been their pastor. Sometimes when this happens, the answer they come to makes you reconsider your own answer.

What matters in these times is they’ve learned to answer the question for themselves, even if their answer isn’t quite what you think it ought to be. But sometimes, it is. Sometimes it’s obvious they’ve listened closely to you and done their best to understand what it is you’ve been preaching and teaching all this time.

And knowing where they started when they first asked the question, you see the incredible journey of faith they've taken to get to their answer.

Either way, you could have shortened the journey considerably by handing them the answer yourself, but they would have missed all the strain and struggle and growth that comes from making the journey on their own. You see that they no longer trust in you—*they trust in the God of whom you've been speaking all this time*. You have faded into the background: only God remains in the center, and upon seeing this you rejoice, because that was where God meant to be the whole time.

This is why you're a pastor, and you can't imagine doing anything else.

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