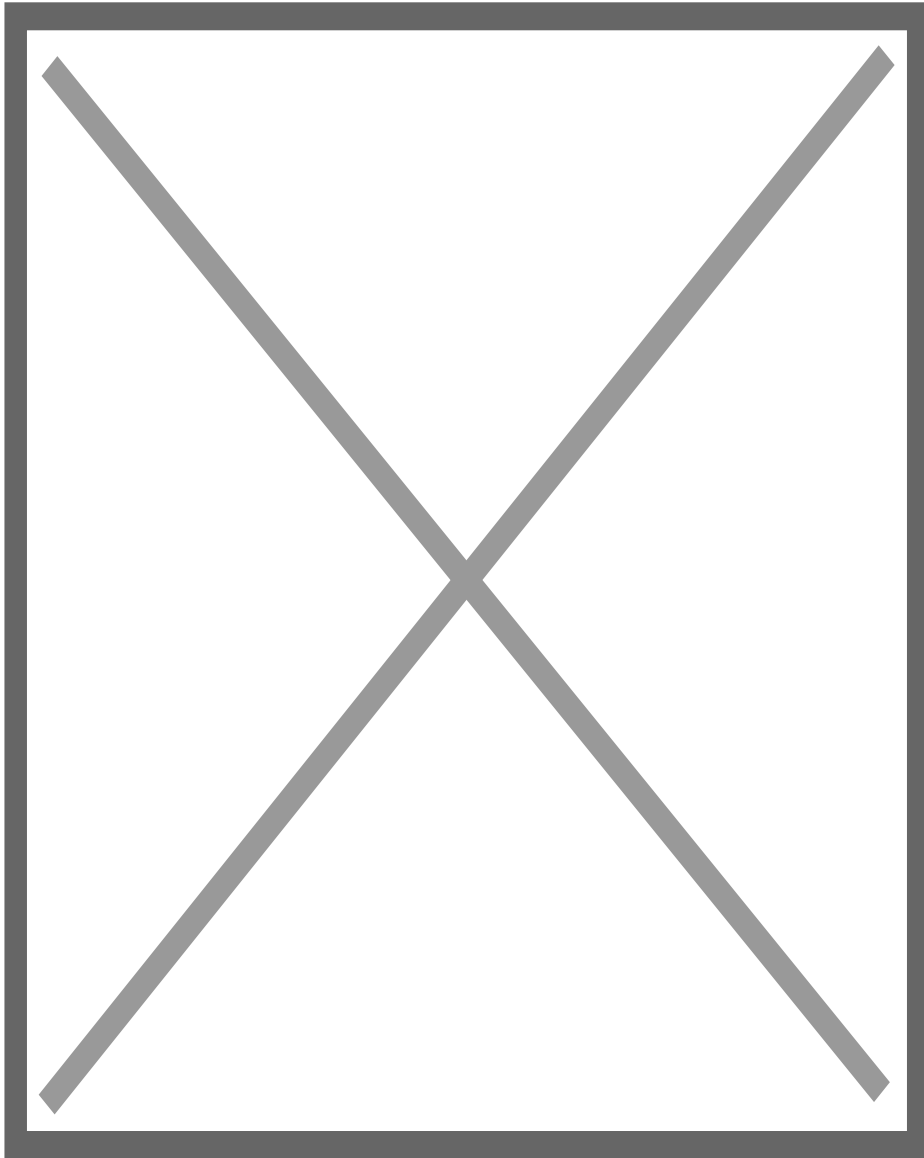


Confounding words

In the gospels, sometimes Jesus responds to questions much like the young Bob Dylan did in interviews.

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue



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I know that I'm supposed to look to Jesus for the answers. I was that kid in Sunday school who, when asked just about any question, would blurt out, "Jesus?" as my answer. When I mull over matters of faith and ethics, I still tend to reason my way to Jesus. My theological reflex is to think that he makes plain what otherwise seems convoluted. I turn to his words and deeds to clarify my confusions. I look to the Bible stories about him in order to sort through my jumbled ideas about God and life. The gospels, I'm inclined to think, offer guidance through our muddles. Jesus is the person with solutions for the troubles of our world, the answer to the riddles of our

existence.

But Jesus seems to confuse his followers more often than he clarifies. He bewilders them with his strange responses to their straightforward questions. That's what happens in John 6, when people are curious about his sailing trip across the Sea of Galilee. "Rabbi, when did you come here?" The question is about logistics. Easy enough. Jesus could recount the details of his journey, but he instead launches into a long, meandering discourse about a puzzling type of food that nourishes a person with eternal life. People are perplexed yet intrigued. They scratch their heads and keep listening.

And he keeps on confounding them. Jesus tells them that they'll have to eat him (John 6:55–56). I picture people with furrowed brows as they squint at Jesus, trying to imagine taking a bite of his arm. Wasn't this a conversation about sailing?

This discussion is as baffling as an interview with the young Bob Dylan. Take, for example, this one from 1966 with Nat Hentoff, a few months before the release of *Blonde on Blonde*. Hentoff's questions were clear and to the point. Dylan, on the other hand, was Dylan. "What made you decide to go the rock-and-roll route?" Hentoff asked. Dylan responds with a zigzagging series of fantastical stories:

I lost my one true love. I started drinking. The first thing I know, I'm in a card game. Then I'm in a crap game. I wake up in a pool hall. . . . I go down to Dallas. I get a job as a "before" in a Charles Atlas "before and after" ad. I move in with a delivery boy who can cook fantastic chili and hot dogs. . . . The next thing I know I'm in Omaha. It's so cold there, by this time I'm robbing my own bicycles and frying my own fish. I stumble onto some luck and get a job as a carburetor out at the hot-rod races every Thursday night. I move in with a high school teacher who also does a little plumbing on the side . . . who's built a special kind of refrigerator that can turn newspaper into lettuce. Everything's going good until that delivery boy shows up and tries to knife me. Needless to say, he burned the house down, and I hit the road.

Puzzled, Hentoff asks, "And that's how you became a rock-and-roll singer?"

"No," Dylan replies, "that's how I got tuberculosis."

Dylan plays with the questions, refusing to abide by the conventions of an interview. With every response, he redirects the conversation. His twists and turns reorient the exchange toward dreams and visions, drawing the journalist into the aliveness of Dylan's imagination, his world-making.

The Jesus we encounter in the gospels doesn't give the crowds exactly what they want. His responses astonish his interlocutors, provoking misapprehensions, inviting anyone around into a posture of wonder and bewilderment. To follow him, to keep on listening to him, will require patience and commitment. Followers will have to reconsider their assumptions about the world.

After Jesus tells the people that they will have to chew on his body and sip on his blood, his disciples confess that all of this has gotten out of hand. "This teaching is difficult," they tell Jesus. Many of them rethink the path they've taken, the life they've found with this rabbi, and they leave.

I don't know about you, but I'm mostly disturbed these days at the situation of our country and world—the devastation, the cruelty, the assault on public goods and on the livelihood of my neighbors. So I keep on reading and rereading my Bible, looking for hope in the stories about Jesus—for guidance in our struggle for a world transformed by God's righteousness. I want clarity, solutions, a plan. I'd like for Jesus to lay out a strategy for

overcoming the rampant injustice unleashed from the Oval Office. But I find myself in the crowds in the gospel stories, with the followers: mystified at Jesus' words, astonished at his deeds, and wondering where this path of discipleship will lead us.

Jesus is not an answer man who solves our riddles for us. He summons a community of discernment. He invites people into a movement dedicated to the performance of God's steadfast love, where we learn together the meaning of Jesus through our witness, our demonstrations of care for our world. We can't live this Christian life alone. We need a movement, a community, a church—that's the context for understanding Jesus and his words. We have to understand his life from the inside, as members of his flesh and blood: God for us, among us, and with us as we pray and organize, as we confess our confusion and dismay and lack of faith, as we keep on listening for Christ's guidance in our calling to be good news for those in need or under threat.

In the chaos of our moment, we can't forget to take time together to lose ourselves in the confounding words of Jesus—to read and meditate on those mystifying gospel stories. Because if we want to organize an alternative to our current political reality, we'll need dreams and visions, inspiration and imagination. We'll need hope.