



“The tension between what I know now and what I’m learning, between what I believe and what I’m experiencing, is not only normal, but a thing to be treasured rather than solved.”

**Dr Charlotte Naylor Davis**



## House of Questions

**Dr Charlotte Naylor Davis** reflects on the role of questions and questioning.

**SPECIAL  
EDITION**



# House of Questions



## This time and place.

Dr Charlotte Naylor Davis shares the story of the 2020 Bursary which paired a visual artist, Phill Hopkins, and theologian, Charlotte herself, to create visual and reflective resources for the churches and city of Leeds.

**When Phill and I met for the first time we considered what our passions were and felt that our strengths lay in helping people to encounter ideas and be provoked by challenges.** We shared the belief that the joy in art and theology was the ability to give space for people to think rather than to receive or be taught. We agreed that Phill's proposed title 'House of Questions' worked as a starting point for this.

The country went into Lockdown five days later, which added its own obstacles to this endeavour. However, the last six months has brought many challenges, both physical and societal, for all of us. In all those difficulties, I feel that the idea of creating a place where people can have space to think, space to process and space to talk to one another was fortuitous.

My work has always been based in helping people process their questions of faith and life. As a lecturer in biblical studies, my favourite part has always been helping people realise that they can question and interrogate the Bible without having to abandon their faith. My own journey of faith has not been straightforward. I developed a chronic illness that has changed my relationship with God, with the world actually. Questioning freely has been an integral part of my faith and understanding.

**So, I thought I was very good at questions and challenges.**



Yet in those first weeks of Lockdown, and later when the killing of George Floyd changed the view of the world for many people, I felt hugely challenged.

What the Black Lives Matter movement had shown is that racism is not a difficulty to be tidied away anymore, and we are going to have to sit with this discomfort for a while. The aim of doing this is to create a better world. It is not just the questioning of British history to discuss the intriguing academic points of slavery or economics, we are being called to see that these questions of history are not discussions

at all, they are lived experience and pain for whole swathes of our communities.

*We need to be okay with sitting in the uncomfortable reality of racism. We need to learn to deal with tension.*

My hope is that through the bursary period Phill and I have managed to create something that will be genuinely useful as you navigate some of the questions that this time has thrown up for you and for your communities.

## QUESTIONING ANYTHING IS A PRIVILEGE

### Use your power with kindness

**The House of Questions includes over 100 questions that people sent in to Phill.** They range from the deceptively simple but deep to the classics of theological thinking, and they take in some practical and societal issues of life in between.

People need the space to explore questions but, remember that to be free to question is a privilege not merely because freedom of thought is a gift and expressing thought is not legal everywhere in the world; but also because if you are free to *choose* whether to engage with a certain question then you are privileged in another way.

For example, a question around relationships is: “Does the Bible say it is okay to be gay?”

But the gay teen asks: “Is it okay for me to be gay?”

The debate rages: “Does the Bible forbid women from ministry?”

But a woman asks: “Does the Bible forbid me from ministry? Am I wrong?”

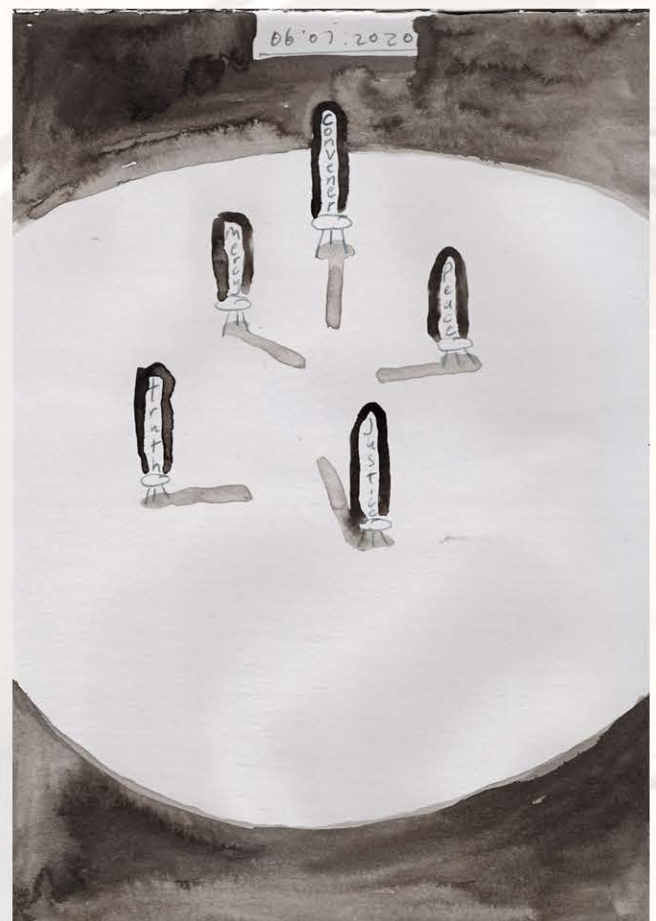
An age-old challenge is: “Why doesn’t God heal everyone?”

But the sick ask: “Why doesn’t God heal *me*?”

**When we have any debate, we should assess the power and privilege we have by noticing whether the question is personal or not.**

Are you discussing a conundrum to be understood or a is it a cry to be answered?

If theological debate is merely a debate to you, then when you discuss it with someone else you have a lot of power. If you have the power, then when you debate or discuss with others, remember that you can choose whether to exercise it with kindness.





# QUESTIONS QUESTIONS QUESTIONS



**There are any number of things that make people feel uncomfortable about questioning their faith or doctrines of faith.** One key issue can be dealing with the answers that they get. People of faith are often worried that if they start to question authority or biblical text, then maybe they will then have to question their very basic belief in God and salvation.

It's the idea that if you pull that one strand of thread the whole jumper might unravel.

Many biblical studies students have been told by their congregation or minister that there are hidden dangers in studying theology, that somehow digging deep into the academic side of these issues might undermine faith. They have been told that to 'investigate' is fine but to truly question is to doubt, or worse to backslide. This is not my experience, but I do understand the trepidation. Doubt as part of faith is widely acknowledged in Christian tradition and is not contradicted by the bible, but it is also true that to live day to day we need some stability.

How do we allow ourselves to truly question and be questioned about God without living in a tangle of strands?

## Questions are a pastoral issue

**I've rarely had a first year student ask me a purely intellectual question.** I've learnt now that if someone asks something it's because their heart is hurting with the tension they find in themselves. I learnt in youth work that if a young person asked about ghosts to be wary about being flippant, more often than not someone had just died. Questions come from the heart of us. We should cherish them, but they can be painful.

At university I was utterly blessed to be taught by two women who were passionately intellectual and graciously pastoral. They were the Revd Dr Ann Jeffers and Dr Bridget Gilfillan Upton.

**They taught me that the tension between what I know now and what**

**I'm learning, between what I believe and what I'm experiencing, is not only normal, but a thing to be treasured rather than solved.**

They told me that holding two differing answers for a while was a gift not a problem and would allow me space to be both a person of faith and of doubt.

We walk a fine line between being gentle with our questions and becoming fundamentalist in our avoidance of tension in our faith. Clearly, the Bible has issues and we cannot pretend that they aren't there by merely repeating the phrase, 'the Bible is the living word of God'. There are inconsistencies, violence and gender discrimination; these aren't hard to find. But the



choice is not, “say the Bible has no issues and never ask again” versus “throw the Bible away entirely it is clearly just lies”. Rather there are myriad ways to investigate for ourselves what the Bible means and then to live with that book of books while we investigate.

Sometimes stepping out of the question and sitting simply in faith is the best place to be. Neither constant questioning nor constant unwavering surety is more holy. God is big enough to allow us to be in both. The history of theology and church life shows us this more than anything. To question is a gift. To not question is a gift. Tension is a gift.

## To engage in questioning is to engage in hope

**I realised last year that I have been ill for over a decade.** When I got sick, no one talked to me about how this would affect my psyche. They talked about physical issues, but no one offered me counselling for what I would miss out on. I found I was forced by my own body to stop and I was not prepared for what I would lose. The rhetoric of illness I had grown up with was one of fighting illness, to treat illness as a battle to be won. So, I fought and managed by giving over my spare time to rest but carrying on working. I made myself more and more ill.

If illness is a battle then I have lost. ME has irreparably damaged my life and, when I’m being honest and not trying to be the great wise academic, I’m still not okay with it. I have questions for God about why this happened and how I’m meant to deal with it that remain unresolved. And that tension I said I loved so much....well, it hurts.

When I finally accepted that I was ill in a way that was disabling, I had to put down many things I loved. Energy for tasks is a 1:1 swap for me so taking a shower is as tiring as seeing a friend; doing my marking is as tiring as going to the pub. I have to make direct choices before a day starts about where I will put my energy.

Going to church became impossible. To get up, dressed, presentable and out of the house in the morning was so tiring, but being in the noise and having to concentrate demanded even more energy. I was always working on Monday, so Sunday had to be a day of rest in true peace, but that meant that teaching young people, which was a considerable part of my ministry, was gone. Part of my identity, the way I expressed my faith and service to God, was just gone.

People would say I was still useful to God because I could still pray. But let me tell you a secret about your friends with exhaustion and fatigue: sometimes we can’t even do that. You see when I get fatigued, I can’t string a sentence together. I often say words in the wrong order, I don’t remember names, I can barely articulate my immediate needs. Coming from a charismatic background I felt utterly lost in my faith practice. All the things I valued were being taken away.

The amount I can accomplish in a day is down to about four good hours. This means my ME is classified as moderate, which is an indication of how severe this illness can be. Yet only having four hours meant that at the end of each day I was faced with all the things I hadn’t achieved and had put to one side.

I am both angry and thankful to God. I know my situation could be worse and I hate seeing the tension in people’s faces when I tell them how deeply painful this illness is on physical, spiritual and emotional levels. This leads me to feel I should turn it around to an expression of hope. While I have always felt grateful because I’m not as ill as I could be, this illness robs me of my one main gift – that of language and self-expression.

In my darkest moments I question God because I got ill by following what I believed, and others believed, I was called to do. Why would God make such frail bodies: what did I do that caused this?

### You see, questioning is a pastoral issue.

I don’t really think that I caused this illness, but my illness makes me scared and my question comes not from my intellect but from my fear. I don’t really want a discussion about healing because I have read and seen enough to know that my body is valuable and wonderful as it is. But my question comes from my grief and my difficulty getting used to this new body and getting used to limitations.

So I have to be honest with you. I do not love these questions or these tensions. They come from a place that sometimes is too difficult to articulate and I wish they did not exist. Even though I know that God is big enough that I don’t have to choose between frustration and thankfulness. They still just hurt.

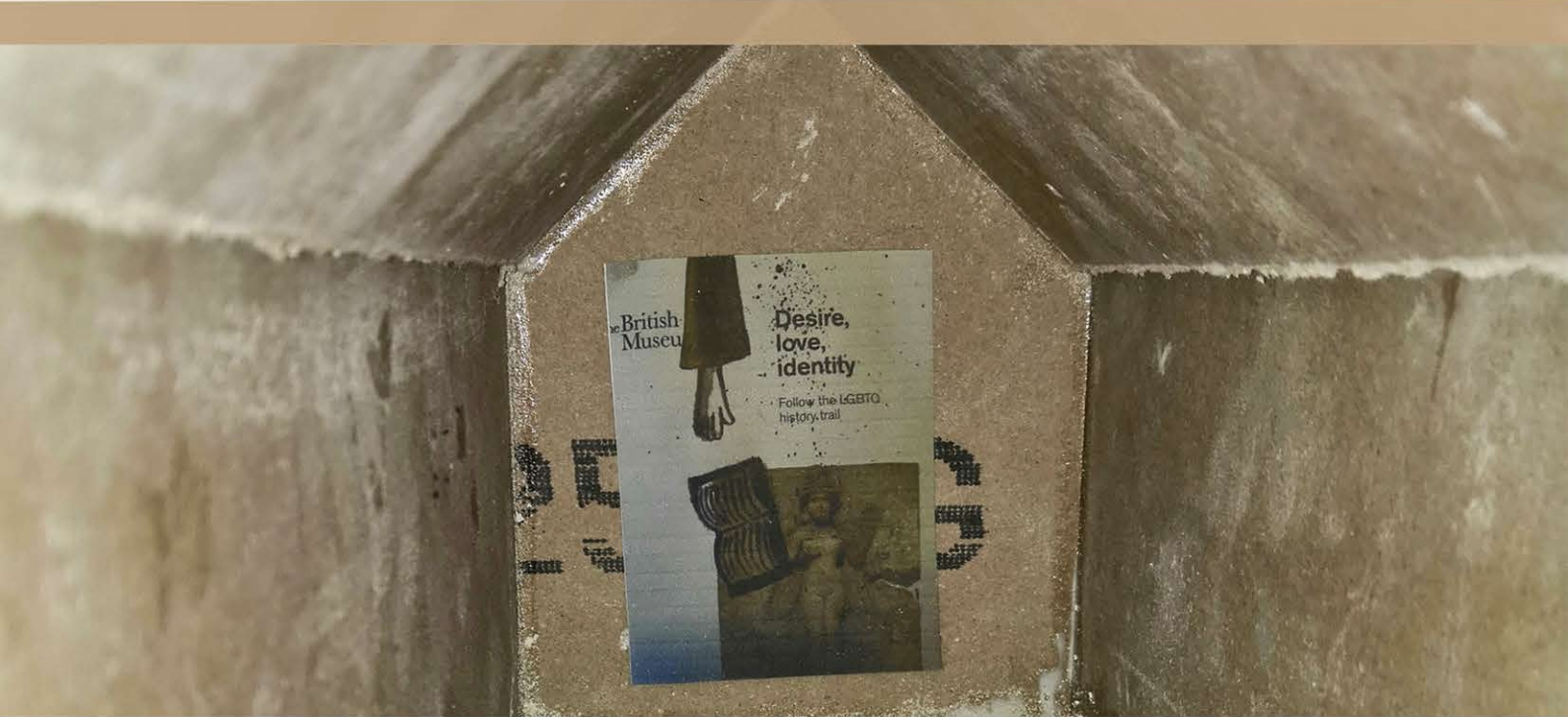


I believe God is in the tension even when it hurts. I believe God is in the darkness holding our hand as we get used to new realities. I believe God is the light in that darkness when we feel safe enough to see it again.

When we question, we open ourselves up to the idea

there may well be an answer to our question. I can't work out whether getting an answer is scarier than not getting one. However, if we sit with one another or with God and question, it's because deep down we believe that resolution and understanding can be found.

**Then, even when we can't express hope, questioning itself is a hopeful act.**



## Being really free to question:

**During the bursary I have found that the language around questioning was often focussed on the defectiveness of the questioner.** Our questions are often spoken of as our own misunderstanding, as if we are the centre of the problem.

Theologically I can see where this comes from. God is perfect, and God's perfection is key to many people's primary understanding of who God is. Moreover, this is true to such an extent that questioning God's perfection would be to pull one of those strands we spoke of earlier: what if I pull on this and the whole thing unravels?

**The social model of disability says that I am disabled not because of what my body can or can't do, but rather because of the way society is constructed to only work for fully healthy bodies.**

The challenge of anti-racism campaigners similarly moves the responsibility for inclusion of people of colour from their shoulders to the shoulders of the dominant culture (white people) to create inclusive spaces.

If we transfer this approach to our faith experience, we can level the really hard question at God and ask, "Why? How long, oh Lord?" and be allowed to demand an answer. If you have such urgent questions you may feel that you are doubting but I would argue the opposite. In asking why, we are confronting a deep fear that this thing that is happening truly is negative, and that it also might be God who orchestrated such a thing.

This questioning comes from a deep place of faith, not doubt.



## MARTHA AND JESUS

In John chapter 11 Martha says to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, [Lazarus] would not have died”. If you have been reading the whole of John’s Gospel then you are privy to Jesus’ declaration to his disciples just a few days earlier that Lazarus is going to be alright and that this ‘death’ is for the glory of God. With this knowledge, we read Martha’s speech as only one small part of the story, a statement of fact not emotion.

But Martha is not in on Jesus’ plan as we are. For her, her brother is dead, her sister is at home in mourning and the fact that Jesus did not come when they asked him to but waited for three days really hurt. Martha needs to express that grief and so does not even wait for Jesus to come to the house, rather she goes out to him and throws her grief and anger at him. She does not meekly say, “I know you are the Son of God so this must be God’s will”.

Rather *because* she knows the true nature of Jesus as the Messiah, she feels able to express her grief and frustration at the event.

Martha’s faith is displayed in her conversation with Jesus. She becomes the first person in the Gospel of John to express that Jesus is the Messiah. It isn’t one of the male disciples, but this woman, who we think of as the homemaker, who first declares and sees who Jesus truly is. It is faith and friendship with Jesus that allows her to challenge his behaviour with a cry from the heart.

Then, Jesus leads her through her pain into a declaration of faith in him that no one else has managed. It is only in being allowed to genuinely challenge Jesus that she can receive revelation. If she had considered Jesus too perfect to question, too holy to be angry at, then Martha would have stayed enduring her grief alone.

## QUESTION WITHOUT RESTRAINT

And so it is for us. We may need to direct our toughest questions at God as though we are not the ones getting it wrong. If I go into the questioning always assuming that I am the problem, then I may never express my grief. I believe that to hear what God has to say about my illness I need to be allowed to question without restraint, to say, “you could have done this differently”. If I only ask, “what did I do wrong?” then I’m not actually giving space for God to speak or fully answer.

I’m not saying that God is not perfect – this discussion is not theological doctrine – my point is rather about process: that we have to be allowed to query God’s perfection, particularly in our own conversations with God, to be able to get to the answer we need. The Hebrew Bible is littered with people who wrestle with God for either their rights or their understanding.

**True communication must be honest, and as questioning is a pastoral issue, we should be allowed to truly question.**



# SOMETIMES THE CHALLENGE IS FOR US.

**What do we do if the question someone is asking about faith or God challenges us?**

What if someone's simple "why?" touches on one of the strands that we think shouldn't or doesn't need to be pulled?

It is hard to hear questions that challenge the very heart of who we think we are, our traditions or who we believe God is. I have spent many years explaining, teaching and confronting sexism and misogyny within church experience, both my own and that of others. There is a thing that happens when I recount experiences of women within church, something that happens nearly every time I teach in academic situations about patriarchy or sexism, that I have come to regard as "Not-all-men-ing".

It takes two forms: The first is that the men/man in the room will be shocked by what they hear and get defensive saying that they would never do such a thing saying, "not all men" are like this; the second is much more sad, it is when I or the woman telling the story preface our words by saying, "we know the men we are talking to wouldn't behave like this".

The second is even sadder than the first because when you hear a woman do such a thing she is prioritising the feelings of men over her own pain or fears a bad, or maybe even violent, reaction from men. She is minimising the awkwardness instead of being honest. This prefaces many discussions of marginalisation across the board including racism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia.

What is happening when these large issues are discussed is that the person who identifies with the group being criticised experiences some cognitive dissonance between what they consider to be true about themselves, and what the story shows to be true.

As people of faith our ideals are important to us. We know we fall short but we have a need to believe in the best of things being possible. Moreover, this has a deep connection with our identity. We have built our understanding of ourselves, God and our community on theological ideas. Unfortunately, that can mean we would rather uphold the ideal than hear someone's story and address it. We often

want to defend our faith instead of hearing people's lived experiences.

Discussions around the recent Black Lives Matter movement have helped me understand this better. There is a response to Black Lives Matter which goes, "But All Lives Matter, Jesus loves everyone". What Black activists and theologians such as Professor Wil Gafney, Rev Dr Mitzi J Smith and Professor Anthea Butler teach is that:

**If I defend the ideal of everyone mattering equally to God before listening to the experience and pain of the phrase 'Black Lives Matter', then I'm not actually entering the conversation at all.**

For many Christians it was a hard lesson to learn that their ideal position (that everyone matters to Jesus) needs in this moment to be subsumed into a different, more specific phrase. It has been hard to learn that despite our protestations that racism is bad and that our churches are open for all people, our Black siblings in Christ were not feeling that way. Or that they felt the church had rested on its ideals but failed to fight for the systemic freedom and personhood of Black people in our communities. I, like many others, felt the need to defend and centre my reaction to racism by comparing it to the sexism I have encountered. But then I would be doing what men had done to me, namely centring myself instead of listening, defending my ideal and asking my Black friends to listen to my opinion instead of encountering their story.





## But what if I know I am right?

Think back to Martha and Jesus again, and the way that Jesus hears Martha's pain. Jesus doesn't deny it. He doesn't say, "But Lazarus isn't dead, just wait and see", despite knowing for sure that Lazarus will be raised from the dead shortly. Jesus doesn't even defend the gospel by saying, "But I am the Christ".

Rather Jesus allows her challenge and allows her pain to land on him, he even allows Mary's second challenge and her grief. Jesus, knowing that they are utterly in the wrong, allows their pain to move him. Chapter 11 verse 33 says that Jesus saw their weeping and was greatly moved in his spirit.

It is a strange thing to include when you think about it. Jesus knows that something glorious is going to happen, and yet he does not tell Martha to be quiet. Jesus engages with her pain and her experience, he lets her own it, it is her truth.

Many of us were raised in Christian discipleship with apologetics, that is, the art of defending the gospel and our faith. It is in many ways a very western way of having a debate – to assert a premise and convince the other person to assent to that premise. When attacked, our job is to defend that premise. It is hard to hear what someone is really telling you when you are constantly thinking about defence. It makes it extremely hard to respect someone else's experience or position, or give them space to re-evaluate theirs.

## Sadly, we aren't Jesus

We cannot be sure that the idea or bigger theological principle we are holding in our hearts and minds is correct.

All the more reason then, to allow someone else's experience to exist and to challenge us before we tell them why we think about it differently.

All the more reason, to let ourselves be moved by their opinion and to truly hear it before we bring our own to the table.

**If we want to create places where we can sit with each other in disagreement, then we will need to let go, at least for a time, of our ideals and theological certainties so that we can merely listen.**

This doesn't mean giving them up permanently or just exchanging our ideas for theirs. Rather it is about learning how to understand ourselves and what we are bringing to conversations so that we can listen without being defensive, consider without responding straightaway, and being willing to know that we are as biased as anyone else.

Allowing space to be challenged is not weakness, nor is it giving in. Allowing ourselves to listen to a challenge or a question is giving someone else the grace to fully express themselves, as Jesus did to Martha.

## HOW CAN WE EQUIP OURSELVES?

**Having embraced that we need tension, and having admitted that maybe we need to understand ourselves and others better to really allow questioning to happen, how can we make this a reality?**

We need tools if we are going to take our own

queries about God and the Bible seriously, but even more so if we are going to take the challenges of others seriously. In both scenarios, we need tools so that we can face these things with compassion.

The main tool is a simple task called 'identify yourself'.



# Identify yourself

**Most of us know that we are biased toward some things and against others.** Maybe our parents' politics influenced us, our social group influences us, or what we read influences us. But we rarely think about how we influence the things that we hear or how who we are influences this.

We all have a lens that we use when we read or view something. It's as though we are looking through a piece of coloured glass when we read and so everything we see is tinted by that glass. That glass is made of all the things we know and experience, our past, and our theology and our ideals.

So, try to work out what you bring to a text or a conversation before you even get started. Here's how the process works; you can follow the questions as I try and answer them.

*What do you know influences your thinking?*

I was brought up female.

I am British.

I am a Christian.

I was brought up with left wing political views that I now still follow.

Those are kind of big, obvious ones. To go a little deeper.

*What else might influence how you react to the world around you and how?*

I am 42. Age definitely matters. Our feelings change as we age, and different things concern people in old age than those in their teens, for example.

I am Northern. This makes a difference to the way I think.

I am white. I know that being white makes a difference to my lived experience of the world. The best evidence of this is that I put it in the second layer of this description implying that ethnicity is rarely an issue in my life, I would guess that my Siblings of Colour do not get that particular freedom.

I'm hetero-sexual.

I'm a protestant Christian rather than Catholic. More specifically, I am from a Methodist background so issues like equality of women were the norm rather than a debate for me in my formative years.

My politics are not simply left wing, but feminist and pretty socialist. I find it hard to not read and react to most things using these ideals.

I'm divorced.

I like heavy metal, sci fi and fantasy literature. These things can be pretty nerdy and leave you feeling like a bit of an outsider.

**To truly listen to someone else you have to realise not everyone sees the world through your lens.**

We need to think about this lens not only when we read the Bible but when we speak to people, when we try to understand their challenges and when we hear their experiences because how we judge other's opinions is linked to how we understand ourselves.





## Tool 1 – Why are you asking?

If you have a particular question about the Bible or faith, it is worth working out why you have that question. Knowing whether this is a question coming from a place of pain, a place of joyous revelry in the text, or a place of frustration, makes a difference to the way you pursue an answer.

As part of this, be honest with yourself about the answers you want, maybe a faith answer, reassurance or the plain facts. This will help you work out where your answer might come from and what resources will help you answer. So consider:

- Will theology help?
- Will other people's experience help?
- Will facts and statistics help?
- Will reflection and contemplation help?

## Tool 3– Don't centre yourself

When you hear a question, experience or challenge to your beliefs, try really hard not to start your reply with, "but I..."

Not only is "but..." dismissive because it implies they have missed something, "I" shows that you automatically think your opinion is most important. Now, it may be more important, but take a moment to check if it is. Remember Jesus to Martha.

### Check

Check our lens...did we hear what someone said or did we immediately put it into our terms?

Check our language ... did we just say "I" when they had asked about their situation?

Check our next point before we say it... Could I say this without putting myself in the centre of the sentence? This allows us time to properly hear and engage with someone else.

## Tool 5- identify the real challenge

All too often we find we are defending against an attack that wasn't made. Knowing your own lens helps here because you can identify where you are not hearing clearly and instead hearing an attack on one of your identifying characteristics.

For example, when I speak about patriarchy and you say, "but I'm not like that", you have let your personal idea of men get in the way of hearing the true challenge. I'm not challenging all individual males, I'm challenging a structure.

If a friend asks if the Bible has been used to justify slavery and my reaction is to say, "I don't think Christians agree with slavery, they aren't all racist", that is because I have misheard the challenge and jumped to defend myself rather than hearing the real challenge which is about biblical use.

We need to make sure we hear the true challenge in someone's question. We need to listen to their experience and not assume it is a personal attack.

## Tool 2- Listen to learn

"Listen to learn" is a phrase used in lots of different places now and it is a good check when approaching both people and resources such as books, lectures or the news. Listening to learn means we seek to hear the other person's opinion, idea or experience fully before we chip in. It causes us to ask, "Am I listening to learn what's being said or just to find things to respond to?"

If you are in a conversation with someone about an important issue, it is worth asking yourself why you are conversing. Are you here to tell them what you believe? Then it's not a conversation it's a lecture. Are you here to get them to agree with you? Then it's not a conversation it's a debate. Are you here to engage with someone as a person and hear their ideas? Congratulations you are in a conversation where you need to listen as well as talk.

## Tool 4 - Have compassion

Too often if we are in a place of safety, we talk to people without realising that for them it might be a genuinely emotional issue. With a lot of current debates in faith and society this is the case, for example, abortion, LGBTQ rights, climate change, equality. These are rarely emotionless. Your conversation partner shouldn't come away wounded because you forgot to have compassion.

Don't get angry if someone gets upset and don't tell them they are too emotional. We call this tone policing and it mainly happens to women or people from marginalised groups. Often issues of faith are personal and deeply connected to us. It's okay to get emotional about them. So instead of getting upset in response yourself, ask someone to explain further why it stirs them so deeply and if they can help you understand.

## Tool 6- LISTEN, then listen again

When someone challenges a belief or when we read something confusing, maybe we need to listen to it a few times before we move on. For example it has taken me ten years to understand what the real challenge of my illness has been.

The Bible throws new challenges at me every time I engage with it seriously.

I thought I understood what campaigning for equality was until I worked with homeless people.

This means we need to take time to really listen. Most of us with a UK education have been taught that the best position is being right. Our politicians certainly don't want to ever admit to a mistake, and they are an extreme example of this position. But if you've never encountered someone who holds a particular opinion and you can't fathom how they could believe that, well, why not ask? Why not listen to the opposite belief and just sit with it. Normalise not knowing things but wanting to learn.



# CONCLUSION TO THE BOOKLET : Secret extra knowledge just for you

Come closer...I'll tell you a secret that you might have not heard...secret deep knowledge.  
You ready?

## **It's okay to get things wrong.**

To misunderstand.

To change your mind.

It's okay to realise that what you once thought is not quite right.

Its okay to allow your experience to change your ideas.

Most big issues in life are hard to understand. The Bible is definitely hard. Politics is painfully hard. Finding things hard to grasp is usually because they are hard to grasp not because you are deficient, so saying, "I never thought about it like that before", is not a weakness, it is a strength.

## **In summary:**

**Get to know your own bias and heart**

**Listen**

**Have compassion**

**Listen more**

**Be okay with asking the question and not knowing the answer.**



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