

Ask Shane Claiborne...(Interview with Shane Claiborne)

February 27, 2013 by [Rachel Held Evans](#) [Read Distraction Free](#) - <http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-shane-claiborne-response>



Today I am thrilled to share Shane Claiborne’s responses to your questions for “Ask Shane Claiborne.”

Shane Claiborne graduated from Eastern University and did graduate work at Princeton Seminary. In 2010, he received an Honorary Doctorate from Eastern. His adventures have taken him from the streets of Calcutta where he worked with Mother Teresa to the wealthy suburbs of Chicago where he served at the influential mega-church Willow Creek. As a peacemaker, his journeys have taken him to some of the most troubled regions of the world – from Rwanda to the West Bank – and he’s been on peace delegations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Shane is the visionary leader of The Simple Way, a faith community in inner city Philadelphia that has helped birth and connect radical faith communities around the world. He is married to Katie Jo, a North Carolina girl who also fell in love with the city (and with Shane). They were wed in St. Edwards church, the formerly abandoned cathedral into which homeless families relocated in 1995, launching the beginning of the Simple Way community and a new phase of faith-based justice making. where everything started back in 1995.

Shane writes and travels extensively speaking about peacemaking, social justice, and Jesus. Shane’s books include *Jesus for President*, *Red Letter Revolution*, *Common Prayer*, *Follow Me to Freedom*, *Jesus, Bombs and Ice Cream*, *Becoming the Answer to Our Prayers* – and his classic *The Irresistible Revolution*. He has been featured in a number of films including “Another

World Is Possible” and “Ordinary Radicals.” His books are translated into more than a dozen languages. Shane speaks over 100 times a year, nationally and internationally.

His work has appeared in *Esquire*, *SPIN*, *Christianity Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he has been on everything from Fox News and Al Jazeera to CNN and NPR. He’s given academic lectures at Harvard, Princeton, Brown, Liberty, Duke, and Notre Dame. Shane speaks regularly at denominational gatherings, festivals, and conferences around the globe.

Shane did a fantastic job responding to your questions, and I enjoyed talking with him about faith, community, marriage, and non-violence. (This interview was a little unusual in that we did it via phone and I transcribed it afterwards.) I hope you enjoy Shane's thoughts as much as I did. You asked some fantastic questions!

From Nish: Shane, thanks so much for stopping in here at Rachel's place to answer questions. I love the phrase that you coined, the Ordinary Radical. However, after reading your book(s), it's pretty clear that you live anything but an ordinary life! You've done huge things for the Kingdom in both your own community and around the world. My question is in regards to becoming an ordinary radical in the midst of ordinary, everyday life. I'm a stay-at-home mom and I struggle with fulfilling my duties and calling to care for my children full-time, while being an active Kingdom-builder in my city & community. Do you have any advice or ideas for those of us at home with small children, or working the daily grind 9-5 jobs, or in school full-time to honor our commitments to family, work and school while simultaneously working to benefit our communities? What are some good first-steps toward engaging the needs of our cities, and how do we do that while juggling the everyday?

I love this question. What pops into my head is that Scripture that says, “let us not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds.” And to me, that’s invitation to live with imagination. Non-conformity doesn’t mean uniformity. Choosing non-conformity doesn’t mean we’re all going to end up doing the same thing, that we’ll all find ourselves working in a soup kitchen, or sleeping under a bridge. This is an invitation—a call— to re-imagine who we are and how we are to live in light of Jesus. And I get excited because I see folks who are doing that everywhere, in all kinds of different ways.

You also see in Scripture that when people encounter Jesus, they don’t all walk away to pursue the exact same lifestyle. For instance, Jesus dealt with two tax collectors—Matthew and Zaccheus. Matthew chose to sell everything, but Zaccheus, from what we know, sold half of everything, paid everyone four times what he owed them, and then went on. So they both reimagine their life and their economics, and they both challenge the system, but they did it in different ways. And you’ll notice that Matthew didn’t get all upset and come out and tell Zaccheus how to do it! (laughter)

So what this means is that every one of us is called to love our neighbor—including our global neighbor—as ourselves. I know a suburban mom who, for every biological kid she and her

husband send to college, they've create a trust fund—kind of like another scholarship—for a kid that's not biologically theirs, but is financially hard-pressed. I know another mom from California who was in this collective with a group of other parents who said they wanted their kids to learn compassion, so once a week they would gather together in a local park to discuss issues related to social justice and also to serve lunch to whoever might need it. One day, the police came and said that they couldn't serve food in the park, so then it became a lesson on civil disobedience!

Now, while there are a million different ways to respond to this invitation, we do see compelling patterns in the gospel. So even if we don't all respond in the exact same way, we can all, for example, see the suffering of this world as something we are called to enter into instead of flee from. We can reject the patterns of, for example, suburban sprawl that are often built around moving away from pain, or away from neighborhoods of high crime, or away from people who don't look like us, and respond instead to the gospel inertia that invites us to enter into that pain. So this means we also have to challenge some of those patterns of consumerism and insulation, and sprawl, and homogeneity.

There are families in my neighborhood who have relocated here with their kids, and one thing they tell me is that they want their kids to grow up knowing that not everything is okay in this world—that racism exists, that injustice exists, that just because someone smells doesn't mean we have to be afraid of them, and so on. So a big question we have to tackle is this: What do we shelter our kids from, and what do we allow them to see? And how do we allow that firsthand experience with pain and suffering affect how we spend our money and how we open our homes in hospitality. We all answer those questions a little differently, but there are patterns to be on the lookout for.

From Karen: Having lived in intentional community for a few years, I understand the challenges of sustaining a community. I've heard that Simple Way doesn't exist in the same way it did when it started. How many people actually live there in community? What is the community set up like? Does everyone share a home, are there multiple homes in the same neighborhood? Is there a lot of turn over of re-locators or do you have quite a few still living together who have been there for several years? Do you live in the same house with others in this Simple Way community or do you and your wife have your own home?

The forms of our community have certainly changed over the years, but the spirit of community and sharing and doing life together hasn't, and that's what we're committed to. The forms change, but the spirit, I hope, stays the same.

Coming out of college, a half a dozen of my friends joined together and we pooled our money together, rented a house, and started sharing food and time with other people in the neighborhood. Over time, and as we grew, and we realized we weren't just an intentional community house anymore; we were building a village!

So now we have a little more elbow room, because we've been moving into abandoned houses and growing the neighborhood together with indigenous neighbors. Some houses we've gotten for a dollar! We've been able to grow into abandoned drug houses like the kind my wife and I

live in now, for example. All said, we have about a dozen properties in the same neighborhood. So now our goal is really growing the neighborhood. Today we celebrated a neighbor who was able, for the first time, to get his own a home.

[See Shane's post at Red Letter Christians, "[Building a Better World One Home at a Time](#)"]

Obviously, it's a little harder now to create a shared rhythm in life. (When you're living on top of each other, it's almost impossible not to!) Still, we have morning prayers together every morning, we share meals together, we tend shared gardens together, we've got kids coming over after school this afternoon to get help with homework, we've got food bags we distribute. But what's cool is that now the food bag projects, for example, are run by neighbors, so there's a lot less "us" and "them" now, and a lot more just "us."

But this is not without its challenges. It raises questions about the distinctiveness that holds us together, for example. So there are always new challenges that come with new seasons—just like in our individual lives. It's like, having a new baby is exciting and wonderful and new, but you've also got dirty diapers to deal with too. Teenagers go through that time when they feel like anything's possible, but it's also kind of awkward and uncomfortable. In the same way, community is an organic thing that continues to grow and evolve and become something new, and with that evolution comes new challenges.

I think it's important to not grow too attached to one form of community. At Simple Way, we're inspired by the monastic tradition—although most monastics would probably flip if they find out we do morning prayers at 8:00 when they're nearly to midday prayers by then! (laughter) Some communities have more structure; others have less. At the Simple Way, we're not trying to spread a franchise or start a brand. But we value that same community spirit. I think all of us are made in the image of community. Our God reflects community, so we hunger to love and to be loved, whether the starting point is a half dozen friends in an inner-city rental or a small group in a suburban congregation. It's not like you either have community or you don't have community. It's more amorphous than that, and we're all on a journey to find it.

Follow-up from Rachel: A lot of people were surprised--hopefully pleasantly--to hear you got married. Were you surprised by that too? How has marriage changed you?



Well, its funny because after I got married, people kept quoting my book [*The Irresistible Revolution*] to me, and I thought, well, maybe I need to go back and read what I wrote! (laughter) So I went back and read it and everything I wrote, I still feel so passionately about—for example, that our deepest longing is not for sex but for love and that what we really long for is community. You can live without sex, but you can't live without love. That's something I've learned from my celibate friends.

I've also learned that, in a sense, you're not ready to married until you're comfortable being alone. In other words, I don't need another person to make me whole or to complete me. I think that's a healthy attitude to have.

On the other hand, I still believe there is tons of work to do in the Church, and the world in general, to support celibate singles. So many champions of our faith have been able to live extraordinary lives, in part because of the freedom that singleness afforded them. No one says: Wow, wouldn't Mother Teresa's life have been more complete if she'd found a husband?! So I still believe passionately that we need to celebrate singleness, as well as marriage, and I suppose that, especially now, I don't see those things as being at all mutually exclusive. In our community, we're trying to do both—to support singles and married couples, to support gay and lesbian folks too, so that they find a community where they feel loved.

So, to be clear, I never took some kind of vow of celibacy. But I still believe there's a lot of work to do, especially when the Church tends to place a disproportionate emphasis on marriage and families. I mean, you go to some of these Christian festivals and they have speed dating on the schedule! And I remember a pastor giving a sermon once in which he held up a picture of a mom

and dad and two kids and prayed that everyone in his congregation would find that for themselves. That's hogwash! It's too much pressure, and it's skewed theology.

Let's teach people that whatever allows you to seek the Kingdom of God with your whole heart is what you should pursue. So if you do that better with another person, go for it. If you do that better within a certain structured community, go for it. At the end of the day, the point is to choose Jesus. So we have to do whatever allows us to pursue Jesus with our whole hearts.

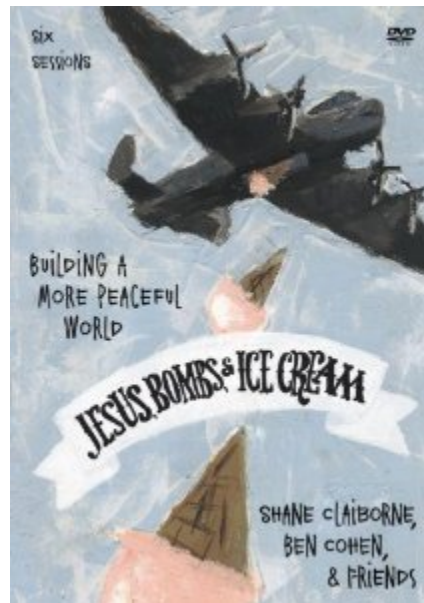
From Gerald: I struggle with balancing non-violence and self-defense. In theory I would like to think I would respond non-violently for myself. The idea however of someone endangering my family really challenges my willingness to turn the other cheek. Since being married have you noticed a change in your willingness to "protect" your family that perhaps have challenged your attitudes toward non-violence?

Part of why I think Jesus talks so explicitly about loving our enemies and turning the other cheek is because it isn't our knee-jerk reaction; it doesn't necessarily come naturally to us. So I really believe that part of what it means to become more Christlike is to create disciplines and habits that cultivate the fruits of the spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—and to empty ourselves of other pollutions that keep us from being filled with the spirit.

My wife and I watched Les Mis the other night, and there's that scene when Jean Valjean steals the candlesticks, and the Bishop covers for him and says they were a gift. Now, that sort of grace is not necessarily our first impulse. It certainly wasn't my first impulse when someone stole our power drill! (laughter) I didn't run after the person and say, "Hey, here are the drill bits!"

So, we have to practice non-violence. We have to train ourselves to produce the fruit of the Spirit. And a big part of that is surrounding ourselves with others who share those values. I like to say that it's important to surround yourself with people who look like the kind of person you want to be. They rub off on you. Community can create a sort of compelling, positive peer pressure—an inertia toward non-violence—that you might not get on your own.

And my wife is a big part of that. Obviously, I would not have married someone who didn't share my priorities as they relate to non-violence. And if anything, Katie has reinforced my convictions. In a lot of ways, she's more non-violent than I am!



Now, non-violence doesn't mean getting stepped-on. The call to non-violence is to disarm violence. A part of the way we do that is suffering with those who suffer. I've learned a ton of lessons about that by living in a neighborhood that has all kinds of reasons to hope, but also really struggles with an epidemic of violence, averaging about one homicide a day. That violence is something that we actively combat. We do it on our block, but we also believe in calling out the government. Violence anywhere is a threat to the love of Jesus that we see on the cross. So we try to teach our kids that, and we try to teach our presidents that.

From Kelsey: I hear often of non-violence & would consider myself a pacifist However, I have noticed that many of the voices of pacifism are men with unexamined privilege and and thereby do not address the street harassment and threat & fear of rape that women face frequently. I've heard about loving people through beatings and muggings - but there is something so dignity shredding about sexual violence, that the thought of it makes me want to forget I ever read the sermon on the mount. Do you have any women pacifists in your life who have touched on this issue at all?

We absolutely do have women in our community committed to the principles of non-violence. But I do want to be careful of using binary language here—like pacifist or non-pacifist. Polarities and labels can be really unhelpful in this conversation because the world is just so much...squirmier...than our categories.

What I do see is Jesus as a living, breathing, existential incarnation of love that challenges so many of our categories and camps. And when it comes to the patterns I see in the Kingdom of God, which are perhaps best expressed in Mary's Magnificat—the mighty are cast from their thrones, the lowly are lifted, the hungry are filled with good things, the rich are sent away empty—what seems really clear to me is that God is deeply and profoundly protective of the vulnerable and marginalized. Jesus is very critical of those who step-on and exploit. In fact, Jesus' harshest words were reserved for the religious elite and self-righteous, who, in many ways, made their religion violent in that they used it to exclude and oppress and marginalize.

Joan Chittister—I love her!—likes to say is that Jesus consistently challenges the chosen and embraces the excluded. So what does that mean for us? It means that we should be near to those who are hurting. We should do everything in our power to lay down our life if we must to get in the way, non-violently, of that which might hurt another person.

Now, I absolutely do not think that Jesus is pointing to a sort of pitiful, masochistic toleration of abuse, or suggesting that a woman caught in abuse or violence should simply love her abuser or allow such violence to continue. Not at all.

What I try to point to in *Jesus For President*, and also in *Jesus, Bombs, and Ice Cream* is what Walter Wink and others call the “third way,” a way that exposes evil without mirroring it. So a big part of responding to injustice is exposing evil and making people uncomfortable by it. You don’t have to be violent to expose evil; sometimes you just have to get out and make some noise. And it’s important that we do this in community. When a community responds to injustice together, there are a lot more options for the marginalized and abused. So, if we’re doing it right, a person caught in abuse will know that they are not alone. That’s a big part of the good news: that you’re not alone in those situations.

Christians of all people should be the most suspicious of violence. We should be the whistleblowers against violence, not the drum-beaters for it! We should be the last people calling for the death penalty because we have a God who died on a cross to save us from death! So one thing we have to be careful of is finding the hardest cases for non-violence and then using them to justify violence across the board. We have an entire culture that is infected with violence—we’re talking 10,000 homicides a year in America, \$20,000 a second spent on war. So maybe not all of us come out saying we’re pacifists; maybe some of us simply make more deliberate moves toward non-violence. (For example, we have a great partnership with Hunters Against Gun Violence. These are folks who say, “we want to hunt, but we don’t want guns that can shoot a hundred rounds a minute in the streets.”)

So let’s be the champions of non-violence even when we find it difficult to know exactly what we would do in specific situations.

From Registered Runaway: Shane what is your position on same sex relationships? I remember a clip I saw of you and Boyd and Colson discussing this and sounded like you supported celibacy for gay folks. Am I correct? Also, what are your thoughts on the state of the culture war raging over gay rights? How do we redeem it? Where do you see it headed?

Frist of all, I think we have to begin by acknowledging that part of the reason this is a difficult topic, and part of the reason we have disagreement on it, is because Jesus never really talks about it directly. There are other things that are made much clearer in Scripture and in the teachings of Jesus, so we all have to start with a posture of humility, and a posture of listening, and maybe even a commitment to disagree well. That’s what we’ve had to do within our community.

Now, having said that, there are certain things that we would say, the first being that God is love. So when people are holding signs that say, “God Hates Fags,” that doesn’t look like the God we

see in Jesus. So we have a duty in that regard to move the world closer to love and closer to Jesus.

Second, there is this tendency we have to think that it is our job to point out what we believe other people are doing wrong...on whatever issue it may be. Billy Graham has a great line on this. He said, "It's God's job to judge, the Spirit's job to convict, and our job to love. And we dare not mix those up." I think that's a good posture to have—to trust that God is working in people's lives and to keep in mind that people are known by their fruit. So in any relationship, I think the question is, "Does this have good fruit? Do I see the Spirit in this friendship or in this community?"

But in the end, when the studies (like the recent Barana research) show that the #1 answer from young non-Christians about their impressions of Christianity is that they think Christians are anti-gay (followed by judgmental and hypocritical), we've gone terribly, terribly wrong. It must break God's heart that this is what we have become known for. Jesus said they will know we are Christians by our love. So my admonition on this is that we become known for our love again. And that's not limited to this issue, but applies in a lot of areas—whether it's in the Occupy movement, or anti-war movement or picketers outside an abortion clinic. They're not going to know we are Christians by our bumper stickers or our protest signs, but by our love.

And finally, I think it's important that this is not something we discuss simply in ideologies or rhetoric, talking at people and around people, but rather that we begin talking with people. That's when the conversation radically shifted for me. I had plenty of apologetics on what I thought Scripture said about homosexuality, but then I met a kid who became a close friend of mine and he's gay, and he told me he wanted to kill himself because he thought he was a mistake, that God had made a mistake. If people like him can't find a home in the church, and if they can't find a friend to confide in without that friend rattling off a list of what they should or shouldn't do, I think we need to reexamine what our faith is and ask if it's really embodying good news for these folks too.

From DeeBrew: Dear Shane, I got to see you in person on your "Jesus for President" tour stop in Dallas. My son, then 16, begged me to take him to see you. Not really knowing who you were, I agreed to make the drive from Tulsa. We pulled into the parking lot of the church where it was held just in time to witness several guys dressed in what looked to be home-made clothing, jumping on top of an old bus, I glanced over at my son wondering what exactly he had gotten us into. (It turns out this was helping the used vegetable oil that the bus burned for fuel!) But that night changed my life. It changed my son's life. You spoke about things that our family had been discussing for several years but had never been able to verbalize within our church or to our families. You gave us the words.

My question is - what should I do now? We have come full circle in our search for what it means to follow Jesus. I teach in a Christian high school. The Bible teacher was concerned when I gave the Seniors "Irresistible Revolution" for graduation presents. My children graduated from this school. I have known these people for years but now am completely at odds with how they see the world. Do you think that being an "ordinary radical" is to stay in this situation and try making small strides in opening students' eyes about issues such as

-why do they just accept that Christians should be for war, etc? Or am I contributing to the problem by helping support this institution - one that has some amazing people but are dedicated to teaching students more about how evolution is wrong than in following the call of Jesus to love your enemies. I desire to use my life to bring others to the understanding that following Christ is radical. I know others are in the same boat as I am, some in churches, jobs, etc who see the great need for change, and are unsure as to how to proceed. Do we change everything or do we work for little victories where we are already and hope for long term change. Or are we just contributing to the problem, maintaining the status quo. As someone in her 50s, I realize just how short life really is. With your broader view of where America is going - Christianity and the Church in particular - I would like to know where you think we as Christians should be dedicating our time and resources most.

Remember that movie, “What About Bob?” and the line about “baby steps to the bus...”? I think maybe there’s something to that! (laughter)

I do think it’s important to keep in mind that conversion is not just about a moment; it’s about a movement, about continually changing into the people that God has made us to be. So we need to have the same sort of patience with one another that God has with us as we move through that process. Sometimes, when I speak at a mega-church or something, someone will ask, “How do you come here, after being in Iraq or Calcutta? How do you speak into a culture like this with love?” And it’s because I see myself in the mirror! We’re all in process and that should give us great patience and peace with one another.

...That and the fact that the Bible is full of really messed-up people! Saul of Tarsus was a terrorist, for example. David was a womanizer who pretty much broke every command there was in two chapters of the Bible. But that’s part of the story—that God uses not only our gifts, but also our brokenness and our history. Desmond Tutu says that the love of God is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free. What a beautiful reminder that we should never write anyone off.

A guy came up to me when I was speaking in Texas the other day and said, “I’m a redneck, and I mean a textbook redneck—NRA card-carrying, gun-toting, pickup truck-driving redneck. But I’ve been reading your stuff, and it’s really messed me up. It’s got me reading the Bible and rethinking some things.” So you never know how your life might impact people.

And when you look at Jesus’ ragamuffin group that included a tax collector and zealot, you can’t help but approach this whole thing with a little more humility.

But still, I think it’s important not to compromise on the cost of following Jesus. I don’t want to get so wishy-washy that I gloss over that and say you can just do anything with your life. One of my mentors says that a Christian can do any job as long as they’re willing to get fired at any point.” So if you’re a soldier, or if you’re working for a company that has a history of exploiting workers, well there may come a point when you might lose your job.

At the end of the day, we need the prophetic word both inside and outside. We need the voices in the wilderness, like John the Baptist, but we also need the Daniels. Daniel worked inside the

king's court, but he never compromised; even though he was in the king's court, he wasn't drinking the king's Kool-Aid. This is why it's really good to have a group that keeps us accountable, a community that helps us grow. And sometimes, if you're the only one growing, it may be time to move on.
