

Editorial: Asking the Right Questions

Eric Newton¹

I keep six honest serving-men
 (They taught me all I knew);
 Their names are What and Why and When
 And How and Where and Who.
 I send them over land and sea,
 I send them east and west;
 But after they have worked for me,
 I give them all a rest.²

As Rudyard Kipling's famous lines suggest, questions serve an important purpose. Questions are a customary part of life, and not just when you are the parent of a toddler. Education, both formal and otherwise, would suffocate without inquiry. Questions challenge lazy assumptions and open up untapped possibilities. They foster dialogue and invite explanation. They admit a need for growth and chart a path of discovery. People who ask few questions probably know less than they realize.

Sometimes life's circumstances provoke a tidal wave of interrogatives. Times of uncertainty expose human fears and incite demands for justification. To state the obvious, the past thirteen months have been such a time—a volcanic eruption of questions, not to mention opinions and factoids. What is going on? Why is this happening? How do I know who to believe? What can I do about it? Has the world changed permanently? And the list goes on. There seem to be many more quandaries about contemporary existence than answers. So where does that leave us? Asking questions is crucial, but at times like these so many go unanswered. Are we stuck in ambiguity? Are we doomed to breathe the polluted air of skepticism? Not if we listen to Scripture.

Even a cursory reading of the Bible shows that God values questions. Consider a few familiar psalms. Psalm 2 begins: "Why are the nations in an uproar and the peoples devising a vain thing?"³ David asks, "What is man that you take thought of him?" (Ps 8:4), and "O LORD, who may abide in Your tent?" (Ps 15:1). Asaph prays, "Whom have I in heaven but You?" (Ps 73:25). Even Jesus Christ asked questions of his Father, specifically on the cross, when the Son fulfilled the words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But to say that God values questions is not to assert that he always deems it best to answer them. Throughout the book that carries his name, Job raises questions.

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² Rudyard Kipling, "I Keep Six Honest Serving Men" (1902), <https://allpoetry.com/I-Keep-Six-Honest-Serving-Men>, accessed March 11, 2021.

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“Why did I not die at birth,
Come forth from the womb and expire?” (3:11)

“Have I sinned? What have I done to You, O watcher of men?
Why have You set me as Your target,
So that I am a burden to myself?” (7:20)

“Why do You hide Your face
And consider me Your enemy?” (13:24)

God finally answers in Job 38–41 but does so with a barrage of his own questions. The Lord was not pumping his servant for information, of course. His rhetorical strategy was to humble Job and redirect the conversation from *why* to *who*. And Job got the point. In fact, he was transformed, ready to ask questions, but with a learner’s heart (42:4).⁴

The flow of questions in Matthew 16 is similarly instructive. Jesus had miraculously fed thousands and then left for “the region of Magadan” (Mt 15:39). These were unsettling times for Israel’s religious leaders. The Pharisees and Sadducees harbored significant theological and political differences, but they were united in their concern about a prophet from Galilee who was turning their already tentative world upside down. So they approached our Lord with a test. They asked for a sign, as if none existed. Of course, Christ’s signs were the most obvious reason behind their concern. If he had not been performing miracles, they may not have been as quick to plot against him (Jn 11:47–48). Nevertheless, they reiterated a challenge they had lobbed before: “they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven” (16:1; cf. 12:38).

In response to this thinly veiled demand Jesus asked, “Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?” (16:3). These prominent figures were accustomed to perceiving the weather but refused to discern the message of the Lord in the person of the Son. Their failure to respond to previous truth invalidated their present demand. *Sometimes our interrogatives amount to willful ignorance of what God has already revealed.*

Though these Jewish leaders had questions for Jesus, the majority of Matthew 16 entails questions Jesus asked his own disciples. Knowing they had misunderstood his warning about the teaching of his religious antagonists, Jesus said to his confused disciples, “You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread?” (16:8). *Sometimes we need to be awakened from viewing life’s circumstances in merely material terms.*

After entering the district of Caesarea Philippi, Christ first fixed attention on public opinion concerning the Son of Man. Then Jesus focused on his disciples: “But who do you say that I am?” (16:15). Peter answered correctly, due to supernatural revelation (16:16–17), but immediately exemplified the disciples’ mistaken notion of how a Messiah should accomplish his victory. Jesus responded with a reminder that death to self and this world is non-negotiable for being his disciple (16:24–25); then, to bring the point home, he asked: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the

⁴ See Layton Talbert, *Beyond Suffering: Discovering the Message of Job* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2007), 201–02.

whole world [or the best knowledge it contains] and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (16:26). *Sometimes we need to be jolted out of our misplaced priorities.*

Taking these scriptural cues, we arrive at an important point of self-examination: Are we asking the right questions? If wisdom is knowing what questions to ask and of whom, the right place to start is to rehearse the kinds of questions God asks us. Christian discipleship entails asking good questions of the Bible and responding in humble faithfulness to the questions with which God confronts us along the way. To put it plainly, we have questions, but God does too. His Word probes us to correct our posture and conform us to the Servant who modeled a disciple’s awakened ears (Is 50:4). Is this our starting point? Are we giving principal consideration to God’s concerns or primarily fixating on our own curiosities? And are we engaged in shepherding God’s flock to grow through scripturally informed questions?

In This Issue

As disciples with teaching influence, theologians bear particular responsibility to ask good questions. The articles in this issue pursue such inquiries. Layton Talbert explores the nature of systematic theology and how it exercises inference in “Levels of Systematic Theology and the Role of Logic.” Many systematicians acknowledge the need to control the application of human logic in their theological enterprise but provide insufficient guidance for doing so. Talbert’s article offers help by defining and relating the major theological disciplines and then distinguishing various levels within the culminating discipline of systematic theology.

Mark Sidwell considers the role of history in relating present-day doctrine to Scripture. He asks, “If the orthodox Protestant interpretation is indeed true, then how precisely did it come from the pages of Scripture to be held by the contemporary Christian?” His article, “Dwarves on the Shoulders of Giants: Progressive Illumination in History,” reviews notable answers to this question and proposes an understanding of doctrinal development that underscores scriptural authority.

For centuries believers have wondered how to relate to the political realms and cultures in which they live. In “Kingdoms and Covenants: Evaluating David VanDrunen’s Two Kingdom, Natural Law Approach to Culture,” Brian Collins scrutinizes a recent answer to this question of how God’s sovereignty over all things relates to a Christian’s approach to culture. In particular, Collins examines the reliability of VanDrunen’s exegesis of the biblical covenants.

Finally, in the first installment of a two-part article, Andrew Minnick takes up the question of how the second Person of the Trinity was “begotten,” an expression that Christians read in their Bibles and about which theologians have written voluminously. His approach is summarized in the title: “Bringing Many Sons to Glory: The Theological Intersection of Sonship and Resurrection in Redemption and Christology—Part 1,” a partial distillation of the argument of his recent dissertation.

Five book reviews on topics ranging from biblical theology to contemporary culture to ethics round out this issue. May these contents display God’s truth in a way that helps equip God’s people for God’s glory by asking sound questions and seeking scriptural answers.