



QUESTION FOR QUESTION

The Power of Questions

Martin B. Copenhaver has written a short book called “***Jesus Is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered***”. I confess I have not read this book, which I am sure is very good. However I am well aware that the Lord Jesus normally answered a question with a question. This response was then, and remains today, a Hebraism. Jews like to answer questions with questions; as a response mechanism this is, in a very real sense, hard-wired into them. This reminds one of the old joke: **a man asks a rabbi: “Why do Jews always answer a question with a question?” The rabbi answers: “Do we?”** Your author continues to work in the commercial field and remembers once attending a negotiation work-skills course. Our tutor taught us something I have never forgotten; the negotiator’s most powerful question is “if”. “If” leads to the powerful exchange – “if I do this, will you

” and then the negotiator makes his or her demand. Questions can be very powerful.

Let us first look at a few biblical examples and assess the sheer power of questions:

Matthew 9:14-15 (NIV) ¹⁴ Then John’s disciples came and asked him, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” ¹⁵ Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? ”

In answering the question in this way Jesus was undoubtedly making a serious point about His Own identity. More than once He referred to Himself as the Bridegroom and has promised that He, as the Bridegroom, will one day return for His bride – that congregation of all those “called out” to be His people. More prosaically we can say that one day Jesus will return to take to Himself His (true) church. The church is described in Scripture as a bride waiting for her husband (2 Cor. 11:2). Just as a bride looks forward eagerly to her coming marriage, when she will begin her life with the bridegroom, so a believer in Christ, even though he is thrilled with the fellowship he has with Christ now, looks forward to that fuller fellowship that will be his when he is in Christ’s presence forever. This is why the hope of Christ’s return is called a blessed or happy hope (Titus 2:13). The more one loves Christ and seeks to have deeper fellowship with Him, the more he will be anticipating the return of Christ for him. A few verses reminding us of Jesus’ status as Bridegroom:

John 3:29

“He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him rejoices greatly”

Matthew 9: 15

“Jesus said to them, “The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the

bridegroom is with them, can they? But the day will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them”

Revelation 22: 17

“The spirit and the bride say, “Come”. And let the one who hears say, “Come”. And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes to take the water of life without cost”.

2 Corinthians 11:2

“For I am jealous for you with a Godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a true virgin”.

Revelation 19:7

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him. For the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready”.

In the above we see Jesus’ singular identification with the Bridegroom. In responding to John the Baptizer’s disciples’ question *with a question*, the Lord was compelling them to get to grips with Jesus’ true identity – in exactly the way that He compels us to get to grips with that same identity. I am always reminded of Jesus’ question to Peter – **“who do YOU say that I am?”** None of us can avoid answering that question – sooner or later – even if our answer is delayed until that inevitable final interview at the Judgement seat

Matthew 15:1-3 (NIV) Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” ³ Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?”

This was a political question from Jesus’ political opponents. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that it was a religious objection from Jesus’ religious opponents. Jesus’ response is simple and direct. These men are hypocrites and are serial ‘breakers’ of the Torah for their own traditions. This hypocrisy was something that Jesus could not abide.

Matthew 17:24-25 (NIV) After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?” ²⁵ “Yes, he does,” he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. “What do you think, Simon?” he asked. “From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?”

The political and social realities behind this question are complex and a good *bible commentary* may us help in understanding all that was truly at stake in this question and its answer. Peter answered **“from others”**! Quite right: we are obligated to pay taxes, even those we may find illegitimate – if they are levied by a lawful governing authority. The tax to be paid here was a temple tax to be lavished by the Romans on a pagan temple. Surprisingly, perhaps, the Lord is apparently relaxed about the payment – although note clearly that there would be a miraculous provision of the necessary money (verse 26) so neither

Jesus nor His disciples were tainted with the payment of this non-legitimate tax. But Jesus' order to pay the tax was done on the basis **“that we may not offend them”**. This is important: we are not to cause controversy where there is a legitimate way to avoid it. We are to be careful about unnecessary “offense” – although we must be realistic in assessing that there are some (and in our day a rapidly growing number) who will take offense no matter how inoffensive we are. It is our very existence that offends them It is what we believe that offends them And ultimately it is in Whom we believe that offends them

Matthew 26:6-10 (NIV) While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, ⁷ a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. ⁸ When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. “Why this waste?” they asked. ⁹ “This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.” ¹⁰ Aware of this, Jesus said to them, “Why are you bothering this woman?”

Could this be the earliest example of a “social gospel” (supposedly doing *good works* and “helping the poor”) being proposed ahead of our duty to worship our Saviour? Worship comes first. So-called “good works” are a decidedly second-ranking priority, if they register at all!

Mark 12:14-17 (NIV) They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who

they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." ¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. ¹⁷ Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him."

Again a political question, and again a trap question. Did the Lord answer their foolishness and venality? No. These people in a very real sense were not worth answering. They would in any case have their brief moment of triumph over Jesus at Golgotha. But three days later the tables would be turned

Luke 2:48-49 (NIV) When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." ⁴⁹ "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

Even Mary the mother of Jesus was not worthy of the direct answer she might have wanted or expected – although in the above we *can* see a direct answer, albeit in the form of a question. Jesus would inevitably be about His Father's business. Why should His mother expect to find him doing the routine or the mundane?

Luke 6:1-3 (NIV) One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. ² Some of the Pharisees asked, “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” ³ Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?”

Our final example, above, of a question answered with a question. Again it was a trap question from the religious authorities, hand in hand with the temporal powers. How often, we may wonder, does religious hierarchy and secular hierarchy combine to seek to attack and undermine Jesus' disciples? Even down to our own day?

Lessons for Today

We are hearing increasingly of Christians being targeted by those *with an agenda*. Persecution of Believers is as old as the church – actually it is older! The Lord Jesus warned that before He returns in the end times persecution will have clear analogies to those persecutions that afflicted the proto-church (see Matthew chapter 24).

In my 2009 book “***The Empty Promise of Godism***” I warned that Christians would soon be targeted by religious rivals keen to leverage the new *religious hatred laws* introduced by certain UK government administrations (but eagerly copied in other western countries). This warning has proved to be correct as the numerous legal cases represented by, for example, the UK Christian Institute and the UK Christian Concern, testify. It is perhaps unsurprising

that there has been no guidance to the faithful flock given from pulpits around the country. The only guidance seems to be “please keep quiet” and/or “please don’t get me into trouble!” That liberal Christians (or in fact “Godists” in the terms of my book) should be reluctant to provide advice in dealing with the hostile agendas of those from other religions is again unsurprising. Anti-Christian persecution simply does not “fit” with their playbook that *all religions are one big happy family* between which “god” makes no distinctions. In the absence of guidance from the pulpit, Christians are increasingly seeking out practical guidance from non-clerics.

“Pope” Francis of the Roman Catholics, in the light of the Islamist *Charlie Hebdo* Massacre in Paris (2015) opined that, in the words of a BBC online report, it is wrong to provoke others by insulting their religion. He said 'Curse my mother, expect a punch'. To illustrate his point about not offending, the pontiff told journalists on the papal plane that his assistant could expect a punch if he "cursed his mother". "It's normal - you cannot provoke, you cannot insult the faith of others," he said. This was of course a very peculiar intervention from the “Pope”. Whilst there is little point in deliberately insulting anyone’s religion, what of the numerous cases where religious people choose to “take offence” at anything that is being said? Has the “Pope” given a green light to “punches” from those who choose to feel insulted? If a Christian says “Jesus is Lord” and a Muslim or Hindu considers this to be insulting to their faith or belief system, is the “Pope” content that punches should be thrown?

Sadly, in the UK at the time of writing this article, the government under Theresa May is trying to push through legislation under its Extremism Bill that will probably be used primarily against Christians. Perhaps surprisingly, David

Anderson QC, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation in the UK, cautioned that people who are ‘miles away from terrorism’ could be caught up by a ‘broad-brush’ law on extremism. Speaking on BBC Radio 4, Anderson warned against the “very dangerous” idea of ‘silence coerced by law’. He noted that it was of particular concern that the proposed legislation sought to curb “something as vague as extremism”. “I’ve not met anyone who can really define it in a satisfactory way”.

Anderson warned that a broad definition of extremism could lead to numerous probes. “The police are going to feel they have to investigate all sorts of people who are miles away from being terrorists, but may just practise religion in a conservative way”. Anderson also commented that the UK Government’s plans differ from previous stances taken in the UK, noting that communism was never banned during the Cold War. When the relevant government minister was quizzed about whether the statement that Jesus is the only way to salvation might be construed as “extreme”, the answer was that the courts would have to rule on the matter. Plainly this is a profound departure from 1000 years of social development in the UK.

In such a legal and social regime, what are Christians to do? How do we respond to questions that are genuine? How do we respond when we know that the “question” has an agenda sitting behind it? Not every Christian can be protected, it is true. Christians should however, be “**as prudent as serpents and as innocent as doves**” (Matthew 10:16 ONMB). When Jesus elsewhere referred to Herod as “**that fox**” (Luke 13:32) He was recognising that the man possessed certain worldly characteristics. Whilst we should not emulate those characteristics, yet we are to apply the same worldly “wisdom” in dealing with those who seek our

blood (whether metaphorical or literal). We cannot always be protected, yet we should not walk into traps. To do so is not “brave” and it is not honouring to Jesus. Rather it tends to place Jesus in a bad light in the collective eyes of the world.

How often we hear of street preachers responding to loaded questions from hostile crowds in the name of “free speech” or of “asserting our historical rights”. Do these street preachers not know that we have no rights as “**strangers in a foreign land**”? (1 Peter 2: 11-12). The most obvious loaded question comes in the form of “what do you think about?” or “what does the Bible say about?” To answer either sort of question is foolish. Street preachers should take a leaf out of Jesus’ book. If they answer at all they should answer with a question. But a street preacher should consider these things before he responds:

- this person is asking an impertinent question. Does this person have ANY right to an answer? (Clue – the answer to that is always no. This person has absolutely no right to an answer). If God graciously gives an answer, then that is by God’s grace. It is not a right.
- the answer to this question at minimum will require considerable skill in biblical exegesis, contextualisation and spiritual insight. Can I do that in this public forum? (Clue – the answer to this question is always no. Even Jesus, when He met with Nicodemus, met and discussed in private session).
- the person asking this question is spiritually dead. Do they REALLY need an answer to their frivolous loaded question, or do they *a priori* need to know that they are spiritually dead, and are destined to an eternity without Jesus unless they respond to Him in faith and repentance?

Any such loaded question should always be answered with a question. Remember that Jesus responded to hostile intent with a question, and when it was not answered, He responded that He also would not answer His opponent's prior question (Matthew 21:27; Mark 11:33; Luke 20:8). This is the approach that should be taken by today's street preachers. Jesus does not license them to respond to every idiotic, loaded, venal question that a hostile audience may throw up. It is astonishing that such preachers feel that they do have either this duty, this skill, or this anointing.

The world has changed. We live in a post Christian culture and NOTHING that we do is going to change that. The Lord will return in due time. But we can and must go on preaching the good news of a Righteous God Who has given His Son in remission of sins. The good news is still *good news!* But if hostile questioners reject the good news, or seek to entrap us – then that is their loss – and potentially their eternal loss. The Lord Jesus did not run after people attempting to change their minds when they rejected Him (Matthew 19:22; Mark 10:22). Nor should modern Christians. We should preach the good news on Jesus' terms, not on the terms that the world demands. Foolish questions should be met with a question. At a practical level the wise preacher – or indeed bible study leader – will anticipate likely questions and have 'in their back pocket' some responding questions.

In conclusion

Jesus prefers to ask questions rather than provide answers. We should rejoice in this fact. Jesus' approach is almost the reverse of the modern televangelist – or even of the institutional church – which seems to think it is licensed to

provide snippets of inspiring advice, or workable solutions for daily problems. Jesus is too much the Jewish rabbi to merely try to stabilise the status quo, or to provide platitudes. In responding to loaded questions, the Lord Jesus probably had in mind the blunt advice of Proverbs 26: 4 and 5! Jesus is not a provider of advice – instead He is the asker of hard questions that compel us to think. Why do we pay so little attention to Jesus' methods in this area? Perhaps it is because providing answers gives us a sense of closure or a sense of success. Some of us prefer to provide easy answers instead of posing hard questions. Like the world at large, we would prefer to change ourselves through our own "wisdom" rather than allow God to change us through the necessarily bruising process of responding to His questions. We need to reorder our priorities

Peter Sammons © 2017

Peter Sammons is author of "One Flesh – What Jesus Teaches about, Love, Relationships, Marriage and a lot more" (Christian Publications International, 2012)

JESUS: ANSWERING QUESTIONS

The Lord Jesus was skilled at asking precise questions that drove to the heart of the situations that He encountered. Some of His most profound questions came in response to those who were questioning Him. Here are 29 questions Jesus used to question His questioners.

1. Matthew 9:14-15 (NIV) ¹⁴ Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?"
2. Matthew 15:1-3 (NIV) Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" ³ Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"
3. Matthew 15:32-34 (NIV) ³³ His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?" ³⁴ "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.
4. Matthew 17:24-26 (NIV) ²⁴ After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?" ²⁵ "Yes, he does," he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?"
5. Matthew 21:16 (NIV) ¹⁶ "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read, "'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?"
6. Matthew 26:6-10 (NIV) ⁶ While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, ⁷ a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. ⁸ When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. ⁹ "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." ¹⁰ Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman?"
7. Mark 2:1-11 (NIV) ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷ "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸ Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? ⁹ Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? ¹⁰ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralytic, ¹¹ "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."

8. Mark 4:10,13 (NIV) ¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables...¹³ Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"
9. Mark 4:38,40 (NIV). ³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" ⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"
10. Mark 7:17-18 (NIV) ¹⁷ After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸ "Are you so dull?" he asked.
11. Mark 10:2-3 (NIV) ² Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" ³ "What did Moses command you?" he replied.
12. Mark 12:14-17 (NIV) ¹⁴ They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." ¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. ¹⁷ Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.
13. Mark 12:18, 20-24 (NIV) ¹⁸ Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question... ²⁰ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. ²¹ The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. ²² In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. ²³ At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?" ²⁴ Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?"
14. Luke 2:48-49 (NIV) ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." ⁴⁹ "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"
15. Luke 6:1-3 (NIV) One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. ² Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" ³ Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?"
16. Luke 10:25-26 (NIV) ²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

17. Luke 10:29,36 ²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” . . . ³⁶ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”
18. Luke 12:41-43 (NIV) ⁴¹ Peter asked, “Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?” ⁴² The Lord answered, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time?”
19. Luke 18:18-19 (NIV) ¹⁸ A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.”
20. Luke 20:1-4 (NIV) One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him. ² “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things,” they said. “Who gave you this authority?” ³ He replied, “I will also ask you a question. Tell me, ⁴ John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men?”
21. Luke 24:17-19 (NIV) ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?” ¹⁹ “What things?” he asked.
22. John 3:4,10 (NIV) ⁴ “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” ¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?”
23. John 6:60-71 (NIV) ⁶⁰ On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” ⁶¹ Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you?”
24. John 8:3-10 (NIV) ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say? . . . ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”
25. John 11:8-10 (NIV) ⁸ “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?” ⁹ Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight?”
26. John 13:37-38 (NIV) ³⁷ Peter asked, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” ³⁸ Then Jesus answered, “Will you really lay down your life for me?”
27. John 18:22-23 (NIV) ²² When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby struck him in the face. “Is this the way you answer the high priest?” he demanded. ²³ “If I said something wrong,” Jesus replied, “testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?”
28. John 18:33-34 (NIV) ³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” ³⁴ “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”

29. John 21:20-22 (NIV) ²⁰ Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them...²¹ When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" ²² Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."