**The End of our Exploring**

**Questions, God, and the Confidence of Faith**

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**An Introduction**

How shall we begin? This is a perplexing question for an author, one that I have not been able to resolve with much satisfaction. The words cascade, one after the other, setting a course that shall take us from here to there. Will it be this path or that? The answer has a feeling of finality, which makes it all the more dreadful. We cannot return and undo those first words, though we may ask forgiveness and replace them with others.

I have sometimes thought about beginning a book somewhere in the middle[[1]](#footnote-1). For that is where every writer stands when they begin writing: with just enough understanding to know there is something interesting to be said, but not so much that they have determined what to say. Or how they will say it. The best writing takes the form of discovery. We set off in one direction, find ourselves at a dead end, and retrace our steps and reorganize our paragraphs. Readers receive the finished project, sequentially developed and impeccably outlined[[2]](#footnote-2), to help the reading go down quickly and painlessly. Almost as though it were a bit of bad medicine. But readers unwittingly miss the chaotic, exhilarating process of finding these things out.

In the pages that follow, I have not given up the sequential format altogether, but I have not felt bound by it either. I have not attempted to comprehend my subject and then regurgitate it. Instead, I have sought to place myself within it and explore from within—to explore and provide an outline, not the final word. That is an indelicate way of putting it that is also imprecise. The problem will be repeated.

But like any author, I have faced the peculiar problem of being overwhelmed by my subject. It exceeds my capacity, both in its importance and its depth. When faced with this conundrum in the past, I have opted to hide behind the voices of others: to quote extensively and regurgitate closely. In what follows, I have refused myself that privilege—not because I wish to obscure the influence of others on my work or to avoid the scholarly community, but to carry my cross as an imperfect writer.

In his lovely book *Intellectual Appetites,* Paul Griffiths describes those who have the virtue of a well-trained mind[[3]](#footnote-3) as stammering, which is a “figure for speech whose acknowledgment of its insufficiency to the topic is evident on the surface.” I freely admit that this book has more of its share of stammering, of groping about for the right words and distinctions to deploy. But whether those are due to any virtue, or simply my own poor abilities as a writer, I leave for others to decide. I have my own suspicions.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In what follows, then, I do not proceed “as the crow flies” from here to there. The contained is instead as a set of reflective explorations, moving in something of a halting fashion with loose connections between the parts. If the image helps, it might be read as reflecting a child’s excited state upon discovering a foreign world. The impulse is to go rushing about, poking at every cranny and scurrying on to each new room so as not to miss a single thing. My own preferred way of thinking of it is as something of an ambulatory stroll around an orderly grounds: there are observations to be had here and there, which may true but not exhaustive. (“My, how the gardenias are lovely this time of year.” “Yes, and look at the hill with its massive oaks!”) Such a stroll discovers the outline and some of the main features, but it is only a precursor. The real savoring, the finding and rejoicing in the hidden hollows and the leisure of lingering to see each particular nuance—that comes later and with a great deal more work.

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Like all inquiries, mine have been shaped by other voices. The most prominent throughout this text are G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and T.S. Eliot—who wrote the poem from which I take the title of this book, but more on that later. I have leaned on them partly because they are helpful distillations of other voices, partly because I am uniquely in their debt, and partly because they provide a familiarity to readers amidst the strangeness of my own voice (which I hope grows more comfortable as we get on).

There are others, too, though they have been left mostly in the background. It is impossible to wonder about inquiry without thinking about Plato or his best Christian interpreter, Augustine. I have spent a good deal of time with both and am the better for it.[[5]](#footnote-5) My reading of Aquinas left a mark, as did a tour through analytic epistemology around the same time[[6]](#footnote-6). Leo Strauss was an interlocutor, as was Oliver O’Donovan.

Among the most important voices have been the living, like those poor students who were subjected to my rantings and schemings. And my colleagues for those two years, with whom I had countless sharpening conversations about pedagogy, questioning, dialogue, and their role in the church. And those friends at Wheatstone Academy.[[7]](#footnote-7) Most important of all, though, are the figures to whom this book is dedicated: John Mark Reynolds, founder of the Torrey Honors Institute, and the rest of the faculty.[[8]](#footnote-8) But especially John Mark. Without a teacher like him to shake me from my slumbers, this book—and a whole lot else—would not exist.

Chief of all the been that of Scripture. I have avoided systematically exploring all the questions of Jesus. The task is worthwhile, but others have already taken it up.[[9]](#footnote-9) Nor did I explore the role that questions play in evangelism, for similar reasons.[[10]](#footnote-10) My goal has instead been to provide an integrated, Biblical account of questioning that leans on interpretation at as many points as were necessary, but is not limited to it.

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This is a book of answers about questioning. Provisional and exploratory, yes, but still answers. I put them out there with hopes that they will be refined, clarified, worked over, and repudiated if they don’t hold up. And they may not. That is one of the possibilities we must face with a stiff upper lip, as it were, if we are going to enter into the questioning life.

But what are the questions? Others have defended our desperate need to question.[[11]](#footnote-11) But those who take it up must at some point step back and wonder what exactly we have been doing. And then we can ask whether we are doing it *well*. These are the questions that interest me. If you are buried in questions and uncertain about how to dig out, or in want of questions because you’ve none of your own, or repudiating questioning because the whole thing seems dangerous—fare forward. These pages are for you.

It was Socrates suggested the “unexamined life is not worth living.” We don’t remember much about him except that bit, and that his insistent pestering somehow got him killed. His general point goes too far, in my opinion. Those with severe mental disabilities have lives worth living, even if they can’t quite examine them as others might. But I take cues from Socrates’ dictum to introduce one of my own: The unexamined question is not worth asking. It has all the same elements of hyperbole, and so all the same problems. Peer too long at it and it may start to fall apart. But as a step out, I think it heads off in the right direction.

My goal, then, is to question our questions—and with them, our questioning*.* The two are closely related, but not precisely identical. If a person asks a question, it does not mean they have begun “questioning.”[[12]](#footnote-12) When someone wonders the last time the Cubs won the World Series, we can have a good laugh and then deliver the goods—back when Teddy Roosevelt was President, or before any of us were alive.[[13]](#footnote-13) They have used the form of inquiry but are not living the substance. Theirs is a one-off query, not reaching very deep and easily satisfied by Google.

My concern is questioning, which is a form of life, a habit, and maybe even a disposition. There is a peculiar quality of soul that the questioning person cultivates, an openness to the world before them and a willingness to consider events with the hope that they might learn something. Their inquiries don't stay on the surface, either of the world or their own soul. They go down to the *why* and the *how* that make up the meaning, that is. And their openness extends to the possibility that they *are* *wrong*, which they are willing to consider in deed and in word.

Like any quality of soul, questioning makes itself known through our inquiries. The questions we articulate are like the vital signs a doctor checks to see how healthy we are. Those that flow from a questioning life sound and feel different than those that do not. It is partly the burden of this book to explore such a life in a way that we can begin to detect the difference.

We are, of course, already underway. We have made our beginning, our first step. Which in a world bound by stasis is always the hardest. And the most uncertain. The step out the door starts the adventure, which is why so many of us tend to stay home.

**Chapter One: Initial Forays into the Questioning Life**

I was well studied as a boy in the art of disrupting otherwise peaceful bodies of water with rocks of various shapes and sizes.

My parents excel at many things, but they are particularly adept at discovering remote, neglected places. During our holidays, I would occasionally find myself on the edge of an obscure lake, fully convinced that I was the first to arrive on the scene. The serenity of the moments had a nearly mystical effect, and if I was a mystic I might have been driven to meditate. But as I was only a boy, I made it no further than mischief. The shore held infinite possibilities, each of which meant the satisfying effect of shattering the silence. I would eventually forget myself in the intoxicating rhythm of kerplunks and splashes from falling stones.

And the ripples, with their mesmerizing circular movements. One stone, perfectly arced and expertly tossed, could unsettle an entire lake. At least as I remember it, anyway. I was young and stories have a curious way of expanding as we grow old. I remember watching the waves recede, diminishing until they were no longer seen, leaving the surface again undisturbed. Until the next rock, anyway, which was rarely far behind.

I never knew what went on beneath the surface of those lakes, but I have recently felt some compassion for the fishes, whom I suspect experienced a rather intrusive interruption of their daily affairs. In such forsaken places, falling rocks were doubtlessly unusual, and I imagine the explosions would send things scattering until a routine could be established. Then the projectiles would no longer cause a panic and a mental immunity would take hold, a calm awareness that the danger might be avoided, even while it was yet very real.

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I have never really doubted whether God exists. Not with the angst that my world would fall apart unless I came upon a resolution. I have pursued the question before, of course, and weighed the arguments. But my inquiries were prompted by those near me—friends and family who stood at the waters' edge of doubt, wondering whether they should attempt a swim. I looked along with them, as best I could, but found the view wanting. A world where rationality goes to the bottom and back to the beginning continues to be the most persuasive explanation.

But I have wrestled with whether God is good, and whether he will be good to me—this has sometimes pressed on me with a heaviness that makes the soul bend beneath it. I have felt in my bones the terrors of a nightmare where God is not good and I am finally and fatally left to myself. And I have trembled at how real it seemed. “I would have despaired,” the Psalmist writes, “unless I believed I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”[[14]](#footnote-14) In deliberating about the possibility that God is not good to us, we stand on the precipice of despair and peer into the darkness below. To do so with the cool detachment that comes from treating the question as merely academic is to miss the point. To answer wrongly—or to not be answered at all—on this the meaning of the universe depends.

Your questions may be different. Or you may not yet have had to carry such a pressing load at all.[[15]](#footnote-15) I mention these only because they are mine, and because we start from where we know.[[16]](#footnote-16) But not everyone has raised their questions against God with the urgency that I sometimes have—and we should leave open the possibility that Socrates was wrong, and maybe no one should. The writer of Ecclesiastes, who was himself no stranger to the questioning life, knew that “in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.” The questioning life on its own isn't necessarily a comfortable life, which can make it a bit of a tough sell among people who care about nothing else. It's not easy to market a tradition whose main representatives ended up depressed or dead, like Solomon and Socrates.[[17]](#footnote-17) For those who question stand athwart society looking for explanations that others aren't inclined to give.

But sometimes, questions are unavoidable. We do not pose them because we come upon them like people digging for gold. Instead, they come upon us, slowly forcing themselves upon us until they can no longer be ignored. The mother whose child insistently asks “Why?” may be in danger of catching the habit, just as the man whose friend finds happiness in marriage is forced to confront his own. Sometimes questions *perturb* us, which is a lovely and forgotten word: they fill us with a sense of disquiet, a nagging unsettledness that despite their appearance our lives are yet open before us.

Many times, though, we hurry through such uncertain moments as though nothing has happened. We quote Socrates' maxim as though it excuses us from abiding by it. We are rarely in danger of examining to excess, especially when the subject is the shape of our own lives. We are adept at examining the sports page, or the latest celebrity mag. Our tendency is toward avoidance, to innocculate ourselves against unsettling questions with an endless titillation of trivialities. It is better not to be disturbed, or to disturb. For as we learn from Socrates’ unfortunate end, those who question well are often not heroes in their own day.[[18]](#footnote-18)

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What happens when we ask a question? The form is one of our most pervasive ways of interacting with the world, yet its mechanics remain ambiguous to us.[[19]](#footnote-19) And despite a few millennia of using the tool few philosophers examined it directly.[[20]](#footnote-20)

When we assert something, we make a claim that may be true or false. We say that it is sunny outside with all the declarative confidence of people who have looked outside our window and seen the orb hanging in the blue. It’s a trivial example, sure, and the more complicated the world gets the more challenging such assertions become. But the grammar of the sentence, the *indicative mood,* describes the world with the concepts and tools that we have inherited.

A question has a different nature, though, and constitutes a different relationship. It points toward the unknown, rather than the known, drawing our attention toward some feature of the world that is currently inaccessible to us. Behind the English *question* lies the Latin *quaestio,* which signifies both asking and seeking out. In that sense, questions inevitably send our attention toward something else, away from ourselves. Even, paradoxically, when we question ourselves. For in asking in the quietness of our hearts, "What is the character of my soul?" we momentarily must stand apart from ourselves in order to find out the answer.

We should think through this *something* a little more closely, though. Those who work with art sometimes speak of “negative space,” or the area where something isn’t. Consider the FedEx logo, which may be a familiar example: the name of the company is spelled out in solid colors, which the eye detects instantly. But the space between the “E” and the “x” makes an arrow, doubtlessly to remind us of their job as a shipping company. Or rather, the "E" and the "x" leave an arrow out, make an arrow that *isn't* there. It's hard to know which way to put it. For a long time, I never noticed it. But when someone pointed it out, it became the only thing I could see.

“Negative space” happens in more places than logos. During a recent trip to London, I spent some time admiring Giambologna’s *Samson Slaying a Philistine*, a sculpture from the 16th century of Samson wielding the jawbone of an ass while standing over a terrified Philistine.[[21]](#footnote-21) The two humans are intertwined, and the whole thing is delicately balanced on only five points. It’s an impressive work, but looking at the "negative spaces" made the intricacy even more compelling.

We don't determine the shape of "negative space" by fiat, not if it is to have any meaning at all. I couldn’t point to an empty glass cage say that it held the negative space of a lion—unless I attached an artist’s statement describing my deconstructive efforts with pseudo-postmodern jargon.[[22]](#footnote-22) Negative space depends upon the objects that surround it. We can only discern the negative space around the lion’s face if the lion is in fact there.

Questioning draws our attention to the negative spaces of the world. We consistently encounter features and facts that we have to incorporate within our understanding if they are to be meaningful for us. But much of what we encounter won't fit immediately. This is particularly true of when tragedy strikes.[[23]](#footnote-23) When the attacks on 9/11 occurred, we were immediately confronted by realities that did not fit most of our existing frameworks. "How could this happen? What shall we call it? Who could do such a thing?" Such questions were thrust upon us, and have only lost their force through the reassuring illusion of our security. But in those first days, we were confronted by a host of unknowns. The facts and fragments left more negative spaces than they filled. Inquiry is partly a matter of finding the missing pieces to complete the puzzle. We know there's a gap, but we are not yet sure what fills it.

We can only recognize gaps in our knowledge because we already know something. If you have never heard of *Samson Slaying a Philistine*, you'd be incapable of asking a question about it.[[24]](#footnote-24) Nothing can confront us as an unknown if we don't know anything at all. We ask if it is sunny outside because we presume the world is there: we know there is a sun, that it comes up, that we are inside and that there is an outside. All these claims are interconnected, and we may affirm them with different degrees of confidence. But they combine to shape the unknown about whether the sun has come up today. They create a space that our questioning attempts to fill.

Consider one of the early responses to Jesus and his ministry. After he heals a blind and mute man in Matthew 12, the gaping crowd asks, “Can this be the son of David?” The question is an important one, but then so is what it presumes: the people already think they know (from the Old Testament) what it means to be the Son of David. And they have their experience of Jesus and his power. What they don’t have, the thing that drives their question, is clarity about whether Jesus is the one who fits their expectations. They’re exploring what’s unknown to them, the negative space between the concept of the Messiah and the person of Jesus.[[25]](#footnote-25)

We associate questioning with youthfulness and for understandable reasons. For many of us, the most earnest seasons of questioning happened in dormitories and cafeterias while away at college.[[26]](#footnote-26) Youthfulness is a sort of intellectual adventure, as the entire world is before us waiting to be discovered. And these days, many young people have been eager to publicize their pursuits with help from the internet.

But while the young may question loudest, the wise question best. Questioning takes a life to perfect, for the most interesting questions flow from a deep repository of insights and understanding that recognize and respect the unknowns. The more we understand, the more fine-grained our awareness of the negative spaces will be. Or to put it differently, the more we learn about the world the more we will realize how much more there is to know.[[27]](#footnote-27) Those who have learned best and longest, who have returned to the deep wells of the world to draw out more understanding, have explored hidden corners and nooks that those of us starting out cannot begin to imagine. They have seen negative spaces that only well-trained eyes are strong enough to detect.[[28]](#footnote-28)

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What shall we say about Job, the most famous of the Bible's questioners? Having lost everything, he bitterly laments his state while fending off the false advice from his friends to confess his wrongdoing. Job’s sense of injustice reveals itself in his pointed questioning of God about his sorrows. But his inquiries are never answered, at least not directly. Instead, God speaks from the whirlwind and returns to Job a barrage of his own questions that expose Job’s limited power and understanding.

It was of that that conclusion that G.K. Chesterton famously wrote that the “riddles of God are more satisfying than the answers of man,” and there’s something to the point. Certainly the riddles of the Book of Job are more satisfying than most interpretations of it. God throws his questions about like lightening and thunder, with a sarcastic bite that is terrifying: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”

The effect is impossible to summarize. And I think it's supposed to be. To simply say, as I did above, that God transcends our understanding nearly reduces the point to banality. It keeps us safe from the force of it. It doesn't allow us to feel the force of it the way God’s rhetorical questions do. The questions are poetic invitations to explore the gap between God and creation from within. When God asks, “Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?” there is no doubt about the answer. But framing it as a question invites Job to look at the world as God does so that he can see the gaps for himself. The questions are an invitation to "come and see," rather than merely telling Job that he doesn't.

This sort of questioning requires Job to imaginatively reconstruct the world so he sees his place within it and the unknowns he is surrounded by. It involves much more than staring into the void and losing himself amidst a barrage of negations and denials. Nor does he simply love the negative spaces for their own sake. They help him understand himself and God more clearly--which is to say, himself in light of God. But that involves imagining worlds that could be answers to the questions, turning over possibilities in our minds to see whether they would fit—much like we do in looking for the right piece for our puzzle. But that also involves an openness to the unknowns being made into knowns, the recognition that while our answers may be provisional that does not mean they are wrong. There is only one answer to “Who laid [the earth’s] cornerstone?” And we must face up to the possibility that losing ourselves in the question, rather than entering into the answer, is rooted in the rebellious stubbornness of a sinful heart.

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You're so young, so far from any beginning; I should like to ask you, dear sir, as well as I can, to show patience towards everything in your heart that has not been resolved and to try to cherish *the questions themselves*, like sealed rooms and books written in a language that is very foreign. Do not hunt for the answers just now--they cannot be given to you because you cannot live them. What matters is that you live everything. And you must now *live* the questions. One day perhaps you will gradually and imperceptibly live your way into the answer.

That lovely little excerpt by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke has become an anthem for a generation eager to toss off the strictures of our upbringings and to throw ourselves into the unknown. The questioning life is not a task to be accomplished or a step on the road to self-improvement. There is no formula we can apply, no technique we can try out. If we are to “live the questions” in such a way that the questions become life to us, our pursuits must be moved and bounded by the eternal word we are given by God in Jesus Christ.

Those for whom questions are life do more than carve time into their schedules to read French philosophers[[29]](#footnote-29) or litter the internet with their angst. They linger over their lives, patiently and deliberately peering into unknown corners with the boundless, childlike energy of those eager to discover what all shall be. Rather than the moribund moroseness of Solomon or the detached irony of Socrates, they yield themselves to the infectious wonder that is the fountainhead of all their longings.

The questions we feel the deepest are those that emerge from the form our lives take and the communities and practices we live within. And the answers we are given deepen our understanding and remind us that it is the satisfaction that makes us whole. Rilke had it right: we can be patient with ambiguities and questions because we believe that the good of an answer that we grow into will prove itself worth it.

This is why questions rise toward the surface during seasons of suffering, even if not our own. Pain renders the world’s goodness *questionable,* shocking us out of our complacent attachment to the blessings of comfort and prosperity. It reopens the universe to us, casting a shadow over all the we thought we knew. But when we see the reason, have found out the meaning--joy beyond words, peace beyond understanding.

It is a sign of contemporary Christianity’s frailty, rather than its strength, that many of us do not begin to question until the megaphone of suffering has awoken us from our sleep. Until then, the questions that consume our hearts and our communities often reflect the shallowness of our lives. We make our inquiries, forgetting that we lie under the shadow--under the sentence--of death. Which frees us to live among the distractions and triviliaties, and stay within the warm comfort of our understanding. At least until death's rude irruption in our lives forces us to turn our faces toward the unknown, undiscovered country and helps us see that it happens to be all around us.

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If I may add to the distinguished poet, I would suggest that we not only “live the questions” but consider which questions we should live. We may care about a question because it is ours, but that is simply to suffer the natural vanity of an immature heart. For all that is ours may not be very good. And if we are to enter into the questioning life we might begin by questioning ourselves. Not all our inquiries deserve the time and attention we are inclined to give them, despite our proclivity to give ourselves the fairest shake possible. Both our lives and their questions must be placed on the altar, tested and tried to discern whether they too shall last until the end of all things.

We can learn to ask better questions. We read old books to learn to ask the questions that those who have gone before deemed important. And we read the *great* books because the questions they ask go into the center of things, even if the answers they put forward aren't always true. And we read Scripture to see the questions that arise from within it, to learn to see the hidden spaces of the world from the vantage point of God and man.

Questioning well is a practice that takes a whole life. We don't wake up one morning and have the ability to question well. Having taught a few classes at the Torrey Honors Institute--an educational environment that inculcates habits of excellent questioning--the difference between the freshmen and seniors is striking. Something happens in the hundreds of hours of practice that helps students ask better questions on the far side. For like any endeavor, inquiry has its own rules and norms. It's possible to do badly, just like one can play piano badly.[[30]](#footnote-30) And we learn those norms as we learn anything else: by studying, imitating, and practicing ourselves.

As someone who loves questioning, I am well acquainted with the internal defensiveness that arises at teh suggestion that *my* questions are badly done, or badly timed, or asked in the sort of way that indicates something less than holiness. Surely we speak only of other people and their errant inquiries! But the possibility of doing it wrong is what makes questioning so undeniably fun, if perilously so. In the long journey into understanding, a misstep really matters and a wrong turn might place us in peril. It is the sort of life and death stuff that every true feeling of adventure hangs on.

It is possible for our questioning to imperceptibly lead us toward places we never imagined at the outset. They can quietly assume the tenor of demands, such that we would pull the Almighty down to us and compel him to provide an answer. Or we can treat them as bricks in our towers, as was built at Babel, as we scale the heights in comic acts of hubris. Searching the nooks and crannies is not for the feint of heart. "Guard your steps," the Solomonic author Ecclesiastes writes, "when you go to the house of God." We shouldn't be so naive to think it safe to explore things into which angels long to look.

We like to speak of those who “make the faith their own,” which has now become something of a rite of passage within the North American church.[[31]](#footnote-31) Such a process sometimes involves leaving—imaginatively, at least—our fathers' house and exploring paths that we suspect might lead to a more flourishing environment. And sometimes, such explorations actually do take us in new and surprising directions. For we do not all start with the truth, but to some it comes late in life, almost as those unhappily born.

But to begin that journey is to play the prodigal, to imaginatively turn ourselves out of our communities by reopening their presuppositions and their most cherished beliefs. Such a process is not necessarily transgressive, but it can certainly feel that way—and sometimes, it actually might be. For in waking to the strangeness of the world, many of us become strangers in our own homes.

But home is where we start from and to which we shall someday return.[[32]](#footnote-32) The path between has been marked out for us by the Savior who became the prodigal from heaven, journeying into the far country in order to take us home with him. He is both the end of our exploring and its liberating transformation. For it is Jesus who has already profaned the mysteries of God by making the unknown at the center known to us: he who has seen Jesus has seen the Father. "Although [wisdom] is actually our homeland,” St. Augustine once said, “it has also made itself the road to our homeland.” The beginning of learning to question well is to *seek to question well,* which may mean laying down our questions and allowing them to be reshaped and reformed by the answers given us by God. For if Christianity is true, then the end of our exploring will be joy and goodness and life. But the path leads down the *via delarosa* and up upon Golgotha, as we take up our cross and follow the one who went ahead.

**Chapter Three: When the Questions are not Neutral**

The role of a witness during a trial seems fairly straightforward, at least from the outside. The lawyer asks a question, which the witness then answers. Having seen this process unfold countless times on TV, it seemed like answering truthfully would be easy, especially if there’s nothing personal at stake. How hard is it, really, to say what we saw? As it turns out, a good deal more difficult than it appears.

I have been deposed once in my life, by the time it was done I vowed it wouldn’t happen again.[[33]](#footnote-33) I had witnessed a car crash that I later learned had left its only victim a quadriplegic. She was speeding down the freeway in an SUV, and when her rear tire blew out, her car disappeared from the road, bounced down an embankment, and lodged against a tree. It began fifty feet in front of me: One moment she was there and the next she was gone. So when the police arrived, I willingly told them what I had seen.

A year later, I found myself fifty floors up in the Wilshire Building in Downtown Los Angeles. Injury lawyers had helped sue the tire maker, car manufacturer, the mechanics who did her car’s maintainance, and God himself. Upon walking into the law offices, I couldn’t help but notice the three investigators playing the King’s Men for the blown tire. They had found the pieces and were putting it back together. I am quite sure they were charging a kingly price for it as well.

My part was supposed to be simple: get in, answer the questions, and get out. Instead, I was subjected to three hours of examination and cross-examination by lawyers who fit the stereotypes to the point of caricature. The legal team defending the corporations had recently graduated from top-tier law schools and worked in downtown Chicago. They carried themselves with the sort of stiff, upper-class professionalism that made it very clear how good they were and how much they knew it. The injury lawyers were from a small firm in Kansas City, and had a laid-back, relaxed demeanor that bordered the unprofessional. They weren’t quite the slick ambulance chasers of daytime commercials, but they weren’t far off either.

Even though the deposition happened a full year after the wreck, I walked in confident of my story and its details. One simply doesn’t forget seeing a car disappear from the road. But by the time the Chicago lawyers were finished with me, the only reason I had to believe that anything had happened at all was the tire being meticulously rebuilt in the room next door. The opening exchange with team Chicago went something like this:

“Tell us what you saw that day.”

“Well, the car in question passed me and then the tire blew out. I…“

“Blew out? What do you mean by that?”

\*Stunned silence\*

“Um, uh, well, it came apart.”

“It went flat?”

“Not exactly. I had to dodge pieces.”

“So it disintegrated.”

“Well, no. I mean, disintegration is a strong word for something that comes apart. It…er….well….”

And so on. Turns out, describing what happens when a tire “blows out” is really hard work. That sort of rigorous dissecting went on for two hours, leaving me both exhausted and confused.

Then it was team Kansas City’s turn, who took the vaguest, broadest line of approach possible. “Where did the car end up?” “Was the tire still working?” Details, clearly, weren’t “their thing.” The whole episode ended with a bang, as they asked me whether I was doing anything else while driving. “Yes,” I told them. “I was talking with my wife. We were discussing putting new tires on our car.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

The lawyers’ respective approaches served their fundamental goal: winning. They didn’t care about understanding, and the truth was of secondary importance. Both sides wanted me for their team and needed my testimony to help their case. And as questioners, they were masters of the craft: they knew that the way they worded their inquiries, the points that they pressed or chose to ignore, would tease out the details that would help their case while leaving the parts that wouldn’t neglected in the background.

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“Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?” So the serpent asks Adam and Eve in the second creation narrative. It is such an innocent question and about such a simple matter. Answer and move on, respond and keep living. Or so it seems, anyway. Read carefully, though, and things turn out to be more complex.

The question begins a new stage for Adam and Eve. They have not encountered this sort of thing before.[[35]](#footnote-35) To that point, their obedience had been straightforward and direct, as they had apparently never needed it to be anything else. “God said it, I believe it, that settles it” the cliche goes. That sort of close-minded simplicity might be troubling these days, but only because it is a perversion of a genuine good. There is something commendable about a devout simplicity, an eager willingness to obey without question once a gracious commandment has been given. After all, the serpent isn’t exactly the hero of the story, and if God did in fact “say it,” is there any *better* reason to believe it?

Still, once the question comes the only way beyond is by going through it. We can only block out that which claims our attention. So even deliberately ignoring the question means acknowledging its intrinsic power. Had Adam and Eve fled the serpent, they would necessarily carry with them the new awareness that questions *could* be asked. In raising a doubt about God’s command, the serpent also makes space for a more critical, reflective obedience—a deeper trust, if you will. It is on Adam and Eve to still follow, but they would only do so knowing that obedience is not a given. Their faithfulness can no longer be assumed: in the face of the question, it must now be demonstrated.

But the question is not neutral. It is designed to serve the serpent’s ends, to erode humanity’s trust in the gracious providence of God. Rather than make open warfare by brazenly assaulting the trustworthiness of the command, the serpent cloaks his resistance in the innocent garb of inquiry. “Did God *actually* say…?” It has a note of disbelief, of uncertainty and hesitation, about the word that Adam and Eve had been given. It is “suggestive” and “provocative” not because it is edgy, but because the serpent is implicitly making a point: the goodness of God’s command isn’t quite so straightforward as Adam and Eve seem to have so eagerly believed.

Not content with a single assault, though, the Serpent opens up multiple fronts. The name he uses for God subtly drives a wedge between humanity and the Creator. To that point, the creation story had only used *YHWH,* the “Lord God,” the one who is near to his people and will remain faithful to them. In asking whether “*God* actually…” the serpent switches to the more generic name *Elohim,* replacing the intimate, gracious authoritarianism of *the Lord God* with a more distant understanding of deity. It’s a seemingly innocuous change—but one that moves Adam and Eve into foreign and less friendly territory.

And then there is the most obvious fault in the serpent’s question: God did not *actually* say “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden.” He did not say that at all. The quote is a misquote, a bit of bad scholarship. It will not be the last time in Scripture Satan (deliberately) misreads God’s commands, which ought to be a cautionary tale for us all. And the freedom that he promises is only effective because his reading is that of a dour legalist. Where God grants permission—“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden,” save only the two—the serpent sees only restriction. They had been placed in a paradise of pleasures, none of which the serpent was fit to enjoy.

In recent years, we have been repeatedly reminded that the medium is the message, that the form of our content is an intrinsic part of its meaning. In the abstract, questions may be harmless enough. But in this instance, the inquiry has a fatal flaw. It redraws the boundaries God established and casts aspersions on God’s character. The question itself casts a shadow over the Lord God and his kindness, a shadow that becomes the shadow of death.

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How can we tell are subverting the healthy confidence that we or others have in God? What if we have deceived ourselves into assuming we are “just questioning” rather than releasing our hostilities against God? That such is even a possibility should be enough to give us pause. It is a serious thing we undertake.

Of our questioning there can be no “merely” or “just.” Such qualifiers indicate that we think our inquiries are somehow exempt from sin and temptation. It would be convenient to think that our questions lie outside the boundaries of the fundamental conflict of right and wrong, that we could make our inquiries without subjecting them to the possibility of confession and repentance. But to excuse our questions would be to allow ourselves a cheap grace that cordons off a crucial area of our lives from our responsibilities before God.

Of course, the instinctive reaction to the possibility that we are questioning badly is to raise up the defenses. We are inclined to presume that all our questions are sincerely asked. And so they may indeed be sincere, and they are unquestionably covered by grace. But errors unwittingly committed are still errors, and we cannot know the quality of our own inquiries until after we examine them.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Questioning is an intentional practice. Our questions don’t spring up from nowhere: as expressions of a desire or an interest, questions reveal something about what we love and care about. We question fora reason, because there is some good we perceive and that we are working to pursue.

An example may help out. The man who who asks whether God’s mercy allows for justice may be faithfully opening himself to the creative destruction of his own false ideas or to a deepened understanding his true ones.[[37]](#footnote-37) His questioning, in other words, may be rooted in love and conducive to his growth. But he may also be clinging to the final vestiges of his rebellion, making a final, desperate stand against the holiness of God. Or he may be merely playing a game, reducing God to an abstraction for his own intellectual satisfaction. The reasons for the pursuit may not be immediately apparent, which means the questioner may not be suited to be his own judge.

To put it differently, the person who wonders, “Where were you while we suffered?” might be making known to God the depths of his heartbreak without demanding from him an answer. The question may be asked well, with the right sort of purpose, at the appropriate time, and in the right way. But he might also pose it belligerently, defiantly implying that God had failed in his duties. Or he may be procrastinating, retreating into a difficult intellectual pursuit in order to escape the weightiness of suffering lest it overwhelm him. Or it may be asked pleadingly, out of a desire to be shown the reasons for the suffering and so have his faith turned to sight. There are a thousand ways that a question can go wrong—sin is multiple, the ancients knew—but generally very few in which it can go right.

As long as we live beneath the shadow, we must open ourselves to the possibility that our reasons for our questions will be hidden even from ourselves. I have sometimes thought that it is our capacity for self-deception that marks us off as human. We are more skilled at hiding our motivations than we realize, and more eager to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt than we should be. Which is why those who are prone to question must, above all, question themselves.[[38]](#footnote-38) If we remove our questions from realm of sin and sanctification, we establish them as idols, ironically creating the conditions for our own spiritual and intellectual frustration.

Questioning is not a safe practice, nor is not self-justifying. The mere fact that we are questioning does not mean we should be, or that we should be questioning *in that way*. Whether we question, how we question, when we question, and what we question—we can no more presume that we have answers to these without inquiring into them than we can any other facet of the world. For our questions, as much as our answers, may themselves be raised up against the knowledge of God.

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Sometimes, such disturbances come from the outside—they spring up not from within the form of our lives, but from without. They come in the form of challenges, as invitations to join the rebellion. They are not obviously so—in fact, they are powerful precisely because veiled. Which means the first step for us must be realizing that the game is already afoot. Eve’s failure to detect the sly shifting of categories puts her at an immediate disadvantage. Yet if we are on our way toward questioning well, then we will find ourselves more attentive to form inquiries take.

Of course, noticing is not enough. Eve might have questioned the question in order to expose its false foundations—not to try to persuade the serpent, but to defang him (as it were). Responding to disingenuous questions with inquiries of our own may not exactly provide an antidote *per se*, but it may reveal the poison within for everyone to see.

But such a conversation is not real, not with the false pretenses that it proceeds under. One cannot dialogue with serpents or their like, I’m afraid, at least not very well. To try is simply hubris, for when inquiry isn’t genuine—when it isn’t oriented toward answers or understanding—then it tends to devolve into an interminable argument.

Entering into a pseudo-dialogue can be perilous in other ways, for it may mean momentarily adopting the terms that have been offered. Eve would have had to imaginatively construct the world in such a way that the serpent’s question became intelligible and its fruit (death) became clear. Such imaginative exploration is not itself sin, at least not necessarily. One can consider an action without thereby desiring it or intending it. After all, we read novels about murder without ourselves committing it. But even that should be done with considerable care, for such imaginative constructions shape our desires, desires that may be disordered and blossom into the deadness of sin.

This is the path that C.S. Lewis describes in *Perelandra,* his fanciful and creative retelling of the creation narrative. Lewis’s Eve character enters into a dialogue with her antagonistic foe and takes into herself a way of looking at the world that is hostile to her creator[[39]](#footnote-39). But it is not her dialogue that defeats her enemy, but a third party who uses brute force. Her reflection at the end suggests that the knowledge that comes through questioning is different than that which comes through outright disobedience:

We have learned of evil, though not as the Evil One wanted us to learn. We have learned better than that and know it more, for it is waking that understands sleep and not sleep that understands waking. There is an ignorance of evil that comes from being young: there is a darker ignorance that comes from doing it, as man by sleeping loses knowledge of sleep.

This is a point worth underlying, it is popular to presume that we can’t understand a struggle or question unless we have faced it ourselves. That may be true in some areas, but clearly not with sin: it is Jesus who understands the outer reaches of temptation because he resisted until the end. He is able to see our sin perfectly precisely because he hasn’t any. Sin clouds things up, makes the intellectual vision bend sideways. While we tend toward privileging the “authentic” testimony of those who struggle, understanding is given most to those who remain innocent of evil yet do not remain ignorant of it.

Lewis’ Eve narrowly escapes disobedience. Yet she must also resolve her questions, which can only happen away from her tempter’s power. But some satisfaction must eventually come, for even those questions designed to lead us astray cannot be ignored—at least not for very long, anyway. Questions designed to unsettle can only be satisfied by entering into a deeper understanding of the goodness of God and of his creation. For unless they are diagnosed and treated, such questions will rot into the bitterness of rebellion.

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The terror of authority that accompanies a guilty conscience can be devastating. I was in fifth grade when I felt it with a sharpness that has lingered, even after all these years. I had decided against reason and good sense to join with a gang in repeatedly throwing a wet Nerf football at a female classmate. Brilliant fellows that we were, we didn’t choose any girl: we geniuses decided to pick on the principal’s daughter. It was bullying, plain and simple, and the moment I was sent to the office I knew I was done for. My knees haven’t knocked much in this life, but they were at it hard then.

It’s a poignant memory for me and it stacks up alongside several other from those years of life. The purity of my terror and the fear associated with the conscious realization that *I was wrong*—the stark clarity of those feelings amazes me. As I have grown, it’s interesting how sophisticated my feelings have become, how opaque and complex. And the wrongs I do now seem more ambiguous and the authorities not quite as obvious.[[40]](#footnote-40)

I may be betraying my immaturity by noting it, but it is easy in a self-determining age to forget how to view the world through the lens of obedience and disobedience. The line between right and wrong grows harder to grasp once the moral criterion shifts away from being tied to the approval or shame of our parents.[[41]](#footnote-41) That distance changes the confrontation with our own sin: while the pangs of conscience are still around, they are less obviously tied to an awareness that beneath the wrong is an authority whose commandment has been broken.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Adam and Eve had no mediation of memory or time between them and their authority. They had been given the command in all its starkness and presumably understood its meaning. The only decision before them is to obey or not, a decision that becomes clear the moment temptation appears.

Tragically, they swallow the serpent’s bait and then die on his hook. Rather than face up to their transgression, they stitch together some clothing and trundle off into the woods in their hurry to avoid being found out. It is not God who makes himself into a question, but they. And it is not God who hides himself, but they who flee from him. It is his *presence* they can not abide, for their sin has transformed all that is good a horror. The open question of obedience is transformed into the open question of God’s response: will he extend mercy in the midst of his judgment? But rather than stand before the unknown and take their lumps accordingly, they choose the path of procrastinating avoidance.

God’s first word toward them is a question. While the rebellion of man against God was launched with a badly worded query, the rebellion of God agains sin takes a more simple, poignant form: “Where are you?”

It’s a perplexing thing that an omniscient God would ask this question. Certainly he knows this as well. Yet it expresses, I think, an interest in humanity. Even from the beginning, in the moment of our sin, he does not only want to be Lord over us, but God with and among us. Relationships demand mutual self-disclosure. Both parties open themselves to the other as they speak and listen. In that exchange, we stand on the same plane, meeting together and welcoming each other. Even disagreement can only be discerned *as* such within a shared intellectual place. Without that, the unintelligible transmission of sounds can’t even rise to the level of not seeing “eye-to-eye.” By posing a question, God opens a space for Adam and Eve to speak with him. He rebuilds the ground between them that their sin had ruptured.

The question is a staging point for the journey of return. It is an invitation of grace. It asks Adam and Eve to acknowledge where they are, to locate themselves in the world once more. We can only begin from where we are, *but most of us don’t even know that*. Identifying our emotional, mental, and spiritual surroundings proves more difficult than it might seem—as I suspect any counselor would readily affirm. Like me on the witness stand, the surface seems so simple: we think we know all that we have done and seen. But when the questions of God come, we are left to confess the makeshift and hasty nature of our garments.

Sin is a condition of lostness, the condition of not being able to find ourselves because we have turned from the one from whom all distances are measured. And in its worst form, it is the condition of lostness *without us realizing* that we happen to be lost. By rebelling against God, we place him at the margins, the edges, and so end up in a disharmonious relationship with ourselves and the world. But it is easy to grow comfortable with those distances, to enter into a slumber and begin sleepwalking through our lives.

We can only begin to make our way back home if we open ourselves to his inquiries about us. Just as Dante’s epic poem *The Divine Comedy* begins with him waking to find himself lost in a dark wood—a curious phenomenon, for how can one awake and find himself lost?—so the first step of return begins when we recognize and say that we too have gone astray. We begin from where we are, even if we start from nowhere. “To return to the place where we are not, we must go through the way in which we are not” is T.S. Eliot’s lovely phrase. The only return toward God is by acknowledging we have departed, a fact that God already knows but desires us to utter all the same.

This dialogue of confession has its own dangers, of course. It is just as easy to justify ourselves through it, to use the fact that we are now speaking to avoid the burden of admitting our guilt. God’s second question to Adam—“Who told you that you were naked?”—is met with a subtle redirection by Adam away toward Eve. “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Adam’s reply is marked by an over-literalism, a way of avoiding responsibility on a technicality. If Adam was there the entire time, as the text seems to indicate, then culpability seems like it should be jointly shared (and given God’s judgment of both, he seems to agree).

The path toward questioning well demands we surrender ourselves to the questions of God, and make our confession as necessary. Inquiry stands under judgment: it is a gracious judgment, to be sure, by a judge whose mercy is everlasting. But if we think that we can explore the foundations of our own questions and the reasons of our own hearts without deepening our own self-deception and self-justification, then our vanity is more pervasive than we realize. The Psalmist’s prayer is to have his heart searched for him, that all his hidden ways would be known by God.[[43]](#footnote-43) Just as the deepest moments of our prayers are accessible only to the indwelling Holy Spirit, so the depths of our sin will remain hidden to us until the Hound of Heaven mercifully finds them out.

Opening ourselves to being questioned by God means, here and now, surrendering ourselves to the Word of Scripture, a word that probes and questions us as we read it. As many questions about the world as we have, and as important as they are, we should remember that Bible has its own questions that it poses to us. Will we faithfully strive to understand the text? Will we live within its commandments, once they are discerned? How shall we respond when asked, “And who do you say I am?” Learning to ask questions along with Scripture means opening ourselves to the text, integrating it into our hearts and habits, and allowing it to form our lines of inquiry.

Remaining open to the questions of God is at the heart of walking in faith, and trusting in his goodness despite the terror we might feel. If we have known pain and injustice at the hands of authority, then those who abused us shall have their reward, in this life, the next, or both. As for us, we are safe in the hands of God, even if such safety someday means the death of our selves and all we know. But we can only welcome those questions we first hear, and I worry that these days we are in far more danger of holding fast to our own questions than we are opening ourselves to his.

**Chapter Four: On Doubt and what Doubt Isn’t**

Though I have spent little of my life on it, the sea has long been a source of intense fascination for me. In the Pacific Northwest, where I was raised, the ocean does not have the romantic allure of whispering waves and moonlit nights. Nor is it a place for swimming and surfing, at least not for the sane. Its beauty is darker and more menacing. To the land-bound like me, its waves were forbidden territory; its shores formed the boundary of a terrible and unknown world.

My favorite spot was Ruby Beach. A good distance north on the Washington coast, it is a rugged place. Massive rocks jut out of the water, while the grey sand backs into the darkness of a rain forest. Sometimes the fog would be heavy on the shore, giving the turbulent water a noisy and menacing presence. Looking through the haze made the heart break with longing, even if of a curious sort: the greyness of the world filled me with the tinge of sorrow that moves us to love tragedies. I would be pressed down by a sober and serious weightiness, and feel as though I knew why the ancients thought the ocean was a great god.

The sea’s goodness can be cruel, for it will take life even while providing it. I have heard the tales of Alaska’s fishermen and have been awe-struck by stories of clinging to life on a trawler while riding the storm-fueled surges. For the rest of us, the ocean has been domesticated: it is nothing except the massive blue expanse beneath our airplanes or the backdrop for our holidays. Those on the coasts have a good deal more respect for it. And the devastation of hurricanes and tsunamis provide deadly and painful reminders of its power. But for the rest of us, it can be hard to fathom the immense ferocity water can unleash.

What the emptiness of space was for the post World War Two era, the sea was for much of the rest of our history. It was an infinite expanse, a territory that cartographers would guess about but could not explore. In the world of the Bible, ships would hug the shore because the open water was perilous. We have long forgotten why men would sacrifice to the gods before embarking, but safe passage has not always been the certainty it is for us today.

Our distance from the sea and its ancient meaning makes it hard to resonate with Paul’s most impressive mixed metaphors in Ephesians 4:13-14. The ministries of the church, Paul suggests, are aimed at building us up “to mature manhood, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” He contrasts this with children who are “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.” The image is a strange one, simultaneously evoking something that approaches amusement and horror.

But his point is straightforward: maturity is a kind of stability, a steadfastness. The man who is complete is as unmoved as God; he does not shift or slide. He has a fixity to him, a surety that the chaos of a fallen world cannot touch him at the center. “My anchor holds within the veil,” the old song puts it. That anchor may be tested—*will* be tested, if we walk with Jesus. But we know that it holds, that our position is secure. “[The Lord’s] steadfast love endures forever” is the promise, and it shows up often enough in the Psalms to ensure we don’t miss the point.

Our experience of the Christian life is rarely so smooth or straightforward. We are more familiar with a sort of hesitating, unsteady affirmation of the faith than we are the quiet confidence of those who know their meaning. For many of us, belief hangs by a thread. It is not Paul’s bold (to the point of brash!) affirmations that we resonate with, but the desperate prayer of the man who wanted his son to be healed: “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!” The moments of assurance we are given are often overshadowed by the vague instability of doubt.

Christians have in the past spoken of faith as a virtue, which for my money is a good way to think of it. Faith comes as a gift. It cannot be earned. But like all gifts, it must be cherished and cultivated to flourish and endure. The land God gives Israel as an inheritance must be claimed and explored, and all of its enemy occupants eventually driven out. So the faith that works our salvation must also be buttressed against sometimes withering attacks of doubt.

From the earliest moment I can remember in the church, the Apostle Peter’s willingness to race across a raging sea to see Jesus has been put forward as the paradigm of faithful obedience. And for very good reason. The eager recognition of God in Jesus Christ often takes us across and beyond some genuinely frightful depths. We are surrounded on every side by dangers and encompassed by a raging sea, dangers that only the foolish would be willing to ignore.

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We have heard often in recent years about the rise of doubt among Christians, especially among those younger Christians who grew up within the faith. How closely the headlines reflect a real and substantive change in North American Christianity is an interesting question. But that the perception seems to be growing is interesting enough. After all, there is a sizable minority of thinkers and writers working to reclaim doubt as the central experience of the Christian faith.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Some of these attempts to reclaim doubt have decried the influences of modernism on contemporary Christianity and the allegedly “rationalistic” approach that has resulted. The critiques are fair enough, I suppose, but the solution that is taking shape is no more inspiring. After all, is there a more distinctively “modern” approach to the world than to doubt the commitments that we have received from tradition and authority? Descartes sat alone in an empty room dreaming up new ways to doubt what he already knew to be true[[45]](#footnote-45). It’s an oversimplification, sure,[[46]](#footnote-46) but Descartes systematized his skepticism in order to make certainty his goal. In doing so he sowed the wind, but we are still reaping the whirlwind.[[47]](#footnote-47)

There is nothing particularly new or even very interesting about doubt, in other words. It’s been around as long as the Skeptics, and they were there before Jesus. In our own day, we have long considered it the apex of the intellectual life. As Wayne Booth wrote in the ancient year of 1974:

“[Our contemporary dogma] teaches that we have no justification for asserting what can be doubted, and we are commanded by it to doubt whatever cannot be proved. In that view one never is advised to see the capacity for belief as an intellectual virtue. Though few have ever put it quite so bluntly as the young [Bertrand] Russell in his more prophetic moments, to doubt is taken as the supreme achievement of thought.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

Or as Booth put it elsewhere, the modern dogma is that “the job of thought is to doubt whatever can be doubted.” And a century before him, philosopher Soren Kierkegaard summed up the mood this way:

“What those ancient Greeks, who also surely understood a little about philosophy, assumed to be a task for the whole lifetime, because proficiency in doubt is not achieved in a matter of days and weeks; what was achieved by the old veteran polemicist [Descartes], who had preserved the equilibrium of doubt through all specious arguments…with that everyone in our age *begins.*”

That’s not *exactly* a compliment.[[49]](#footnote-49) Kierkegaard’s concern is that by making doubt the posture through which we interact with the world, we inadvertently trivialize and cheapen it.

Our situation is the reverse of a courtroom: in order to be thought rational, we must presume our beliefs false unless we can rustle up enough evidence to justify them. They are guilty until proven innocent, as it were, hanged and then sent off to the trial. The rules are such that mere belief is for simpletons and the intellectually lazy.[[50]](#footnote-50) It is no virtue, especially if the odds and evidence are for the moment against us (which may bethe precise moment when virtue is needed).[[51]](#footnote-51)

There is a cultural incentive to doubt, then, that we should be candid about—especially for cosmopolitan-minded younger Christians who are eager to rethink our world. For us, the cultural rewards are all on the side of tossing out what we’ve been given and starting up new and fresh. Trafficking in doubt draws a crowd, increasing pageviews and advertisement revenues because anxious uncertainty seems more “authentic” and “honest”[[52]](#footnote-52) than the confident sincerity of faith. Cultural prestige comes with calling orthodoxy into question[[53]](#footnote-53). Novelty draws a crowd that the “same old thing” can’t. It’s fashionable to rethink everything, because the old is no longer news—even if it’s still good.

Yet I note with some irony that the revolutionary, counter-cultural stance is the same as ever: to say our creed with the confidence that comes from finding that it is true. In a world saturated by sarcasm and a diffident detachment on the so-called “hard questions,” the earnest confidence of belief sounds different*,* as the master satirist and devout Catholic Stephen Colbert has aptly demonstrated. At least three times on his show he has “spontaneously” begun reciting the Nicene Creed, a traditional statement of what Christians believe. His ironic non-ironic performance has enough layers to make heads spin, but each time the audience starts with an uneasy laugher and ends up cheering. Because in a world pervaded by the cool and vague emptiness of a cheapened, cynical skepticism, the sharp, bold colors of belief make a welcome and refreshing contrast.

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A few qualifications and distinctions are necessary at this point. Ever since the tragic events of 9/11, worries about religious fundamentalism have grown apace, for obvious reasons. It’s a complex phenomenon, but in Christianity’s case the fundamentalist stance has sometimes taken shape as an overreaction against a skeptical climate. It has sought to preserve faith at all costs, out of the worry that at some deep level reason or science or new evidence might contradict it. In that sense, it is a position that is far less confident than it pretends to be: it feels a threat, but doesn’t know how to respond to it, and so ends up being reduced to shouting its answers while running away, rather than by staying and speaking.[[54]](#footnote-54)

The posture of faith, though, does not close itself off from questions or critical reflection. In that way it differs from the bunker mentality of fundamentalism. If anything, faith is the presupposition to questions and inquiry, the ground that we stand on as we look out and survey the world.

The contemporary discussion about faith and doubt has wavered between those two extremes: either we believe and do not question, or we doubt and question everything. But as long as doubt and questioning are treated as the same, we remain sub-biblical in our understanding of faith. Our questions need not be rooted in the wavering uncertainty that characterizes doubt: they can have the tone of a cheerful, eager, and confident exploration of the revelation God has given us.

Doubt goes beyond instability, though. It means the fragmentation of the person, the intrusion of a doublemindedness. When we doubt, we hesitate about whether we should welcome what has been given. To doubt whether *Jesus is Lord* is not to explore its negative spaces or search out its meaning. The person who doubts sees enough to be uncertain about whether they want to go further. They hold themselves back from entering and living within the world where it makes sense. Such a posture is neither an outright rejection nor the boldness of belief, and leaves us vacillating between two paths without walking down either of them.

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“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” In the middle of the crucifixion, the crux of history, Jesus articulates the deepest anxiety humanity knows: whether God will be good to us in the midst of our sin and suffering[[55]](#footnote-55). He poses a question that seems to indicate something like doubt. Chesterton once suggested that the line made Christianity “the one religion in which God seemed himself for an instant to be an atheist.”[[56]](#footnote-56) It is at least the line on which Christianity’s current emphasis on doubt most prominently rests.

Yet before we embrace doubt on these grounds, we should question it a little more closely. While Scripture makes room for lamentation and grief, for the bitter sorrow of deferred longing, its exhortation and encouragement routinely moves away from doubt. Hesitating, anxious moments are clearly present, but they are not necessarily commended.[[57]](#footnote-57)

For instance, the Psalms and prophets are permeated by the mournful, “How long, oh Lord?” It is a cry of sorrow and lament, a plea for God to vindicate his people and relieve their suffering. Yet while the form is clearly an anxious one, the mood the question sets is more certain than it seems. The ground for such a desperate plea is a fundamental affirmation of Israel’s dependency upon God and his action. It may be “faith in the foxhole,” but it is no less faith for it. The mournful cry of longing and frustration is simply faith within a minor key: we do not so pour out our hearts to those whom we do not believe will listen.

Or consider the angst that the Psalmists capture: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil against me?[[58]](#footnote-58)” The Psalmist’s question is rooted in his troubling experience: “My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me continually, “where is your God?” It is evidence that the people bothering him want, a clear and certain answer to their skepticism about God’s activity. The psalmist finds reprieve for his faith by turning backward. He will “remember [God] from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.” The inner unrest isn’t valorized or viewed as a sign of maturity. It is instead an opportunity for exhortation and confession. “Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him” provides the answer to his own question. The momentary experience of doubt is expunged, driven out by the worshipful certainty that God will act. As a different Psalmist will write when wrestling with the success of the wicked, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” The answer of God’s faithfulness makes the experience of instability questionable to us, rather than the other way around.

This is why many of the moments of uncertainty are often accompanied by calls for God to remember his covenant, to arise from his slumber and defend his people. Psalm 74, for instance, opens with a lament that comes in the form of a question: “O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the people of your pasture?” But it closes with an appeal, a supplication: “Arise, O God, defend your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day. Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you which goes up continually.” The first word may take the form of a question, but its character is revealed in the end: it is prayer that the psalmist partakes in, prayer that is encompassed by a commitment to faithful obedience. His frustration with God’s inaction is the form his faith momentarily takes.

While the New Testament does not provide us the rich interior vocabulary that the Psalms offers, it clearly indicates that moments of uncertainty can be expected to come upon those who follow Jesus. Facing his own death, John the Baptist asks Jesus whether he was the one that they had longed for, or whether they should look for someone else. Given that John’s vocation was to announce the Messiah’s coming, the candor of his inquiry is illuminating.

Yet this too may take the form of either faith or doubt. The question is similar to what Jesus asks Peter: who do you say that I am? John’s question only makes sense within his commitment that there *is* such a one. He has not wavered in his devotion to the Messiah: if anything, it is his earnest confidence that the promise is true that moves him inquire (again!) about the best possible candidate.[[59]](#footnote-59) What looks at first glance like a wavering commitment is swept up within the trustful repose of love. As Joseph Ratzinger once wrote, “We have to pose the question, ‘Are you really He’, not only through honesty of thought and because of reason’s responsibility, but also in accordance with the intrinsic law of love, which wants to know more and more him to whom it has given its ‘Yes’, so as to be able to love him more.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

We might think the resurrection ended the possibility of such uncertainty, but the transformation isn’t quite so simple. The Gospel according to Mark ends with a surprising note: “And [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” As though troubled by the unstable ending, later Christians added additional material to the original manuscripts.

But it is precisely at that moment that Mark expects his reader to start over: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God…” His audience would have been well acquainted with fear, repressed and persecuted as it was.[[61]](#footnote-61) And such hostile conditions for belief would, I suspect, breed uncertainty over the resurrection’s reality

But Mark’s book reshapes how we read and therefore how we question: in the center of the Gospel, Mark recounts a curious healing by Jesus. He puts mud on a blind man’s eye, and then washes it off. But the blind man is not fully healed; he can only see “men walking about like trees.” So Jesus repeats the process, giving the man his full sight. Surely he could have healed him the first time. So what is going on?

Immediately after that moment, Peter famously confesses that Jesus is the Christ, and then has to be rebuked because he got the meaning wrong.[[62]](#footnote-62) I think Mark’s point is that the insight and understanding—the vision—the disciples had during Jesus’ ministry was necessarily imperfect. Only after the “second healing” of their sight by the resurrection could they see Jesus properly.[[63]](#footnote-63) That perspective enables them to reinterpret Jesus’ life. Mark’s interest is in showing the power of the resurrection through Jesus’ earthly ministry. Such a vision helps us see the shape of God within the life of a man.

Having your expectations and hopes shattered creates a sense of fear and confusion. It’s disorienting, in other words, when we encounter a fact that forces the re-evaluation of our paradigm. In such a moment, hearing “The beginning of the Gospel…” makes perfect sense. For in such moments of confusion, we long for the word of God to break forth into our lives and make sense of them. We join with the Psalmists in their lamentations and longings: *How long,* oh Lord? The hesitating, unsettled mood that afflicts us forces our faith to take the form of virtue as we train our eyes to see the resurrection power in the nooks and crannies of places we least expected it to appear.[[64]](#footnote-64)

And then there is Thomas, blessed doubting Thomas, patron saint of the doubtful. It’s a popular passage, yet we often overlook that Jesus’s expectations for Thomas were apparently different than for the rest of the crew.[[65]](#footnote-65) When he first appears to the disciples, John makes a point to mention that Jesus “showed them his hands and his side,”[[66]](#footnote-66) presumably because he had to*.*  Thomas simply wanted what everyone else had already been given: visible and physical confirmation that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Jesus’s response is indicative of the sort of emphasis the New Testament (and the Bible) places on faith. The command is direct and straightforward: “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Nor is it limited to its context, for Jesus in the next breath suggests that it is those who believe without seeing him directly that shall be “blessed.” Yet that Jesus commands it suggests that we should not assume it: unbelief remains a possibility, even for those disciples whom Jesus called.

But why is Thomas treated differently? Why is he chastised when no one else was? In John’s account,the apostles receive the Holy Spirit eight days before Thomas sees Jesus, rather than at Pentecost as Luke records.[[67]](#footnote-67) At that time, they are endowed with the authority Jesus had to forgive sins and withhold judgment.[[68]](#footnote-68) But judging from how Jesus treats Thomas, the other disciples’ testimony has apparently also been made authoritative: Thomas is chastised not simply for his disbelief, but for his unwillingness to accept the authorized witness of the other disciples. “Blessed are those who believe,” not magically and without evidence, but on the basis of the authorized witness of the apostles to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.[[69]](#footnote-69)

One more bit of evidence: we spoke before of the stability of faith. James 1:6 makes the Pauline point well: “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” Such a person who does doubt is “double-minded” and “unstable in all his ways.” The critique of doubt is a strong one, but in line with the exhortations to believe found throughout the entire New Testament.[[70]](#footnote-70)

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The doubts that we see in Scripture, then, are taken up within the life of faith and brought to resolution, not necessarily by answers but by the life of prayer. We are not called to bury doubts, but to confess them. “Have mercy on those who doubt” is Jude’s command, a command that can be fulfilled precisely because God has had mercy on us all. Doubt is not an inevitable part of the Christian life—it is not a sign of maturity or strength—but it will always remain a possibility. And the ability to question well is best cultivated when we understand and empathize with the turmoil that doubting induces, so as to be diligent in guarding ourselves from it as well. It is mercy and courage that the strong have to give those who doubt, not judgment and condemnation, precisely because they have drunk deeply at the never-ending well.

But there is lamentation and mourning, and the sorrowful pleading for Christ to return that go with them. Lamentation keeps doubt at bay. The absence of genuine, sorrowful lamentation inside of our worship services and communities is more to blame for the rise of doubt and instability among younger Christians than any French philosopher ever could be.[[71]](#footnote-71) Not only is its absence a failure to preach the whole counsel of God—which includes an entire book devoted to *Lamentations*—but it leaves a space where unhealthy expressions of uncertainty take root and flourish.

The freedom to bring our laments before God and utter our complaints in the presence of the Most High is the only answer we have to our uncertainties and doubts. In C.S. Lewis’s most profound novel, *’Til We Have Faces,* the queen raises her grievances against the gods for their (allegedly) unjust treatment. Yet as she reads, she slowly becomes aware that her meticulously prepared manuscript has been reduced to a single paragraph, a paragraph that she is simply repeating. For once uttered in the presence of the Almighty, our complaints turn out to be much less substantial than they seemed down below. The process ends when a god speaks: “Enough. Are you answered?” The only response can be “yes,” for the making of the lament and the receiving satisfaction for it are one and the same.

In the same way, Jesus’s cry on the cross strikes us as a moment of despair, in which all the doubters and the anxious can find sympathy. Yet from the vantage point of the resurrection, the cry of despair is transformed into a shout of triumph, just as the Psalmist’s mournful “How long?” becomes John’s triumphal “*Maranatha,* Come quickly Lord Jesus!” For the answer given us in Jesus is that he was not abandoned as it seemed.

But Jesus wants us to go beyond the line he quotes. The Jewish people didn’t simply quote a verse: they quoted a verse that brought along the passage for hearers[[72]](#footnote-72). Psalm 22 begins with a question about God’s absence, but like most laments in the Psalms, it moves toward a vigorous affirmation of God’s faithfulness: “For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and *he has not hidden his face from him*, but has heard, when he cried to him.”[[73]](#footnote-73) It is the momentary experience of abandonment that cannot be trusted—even within the human life of Jesus. The doubt uttered in the Psalm is an important pretext for the glorious affirmation of God’s unrelenting faithfulness. The poem closes with a remarkable affirmation that all the peoples of the earth shall worship the Lord, “even the one who could not keep himself alive.” And all the future generations shall proclaim that the “Lord *has* done it,” that he has rescued his beloved from his adversaries. For despite all appearances to the contrary when the event occurs, when we stand backward from the Resurrection and look at the cross, we see that all the promises of God are ever and always *yes* and *amen*, all to the glory of God.

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The attempt to rescue doubt to deepen the Christian life seems like a correction against our culture’s anemic understanding of faith and the hostility toward questions it produces. But remedies can prove worse than the disease. And a superficial understanding of faith has led to an equally stunted notion of doubt. The Bible knows much of lamentation and brokenness, of pleading for the return. It knows of those who have proclaimed that the anchor held within the veil because it was tested at every turn. But that is the paradox of faith: the more sure our commitment to the power of God’s promises, the louder our lament will be when we see them unfulfilled. The more unwavering our affirmation of God’s goodness, the more sure will be our pursuit of justice. The more we trust in the promises, the more we will question our experiences.

The way forward is the way of faith, a faith that does not deny questions or questioning but enfolds them into itself and transforms them into love. For faith is the pretext for questioning well, the atmosphere which sustains patient, longing inquiry. “Faith comes by hearing,” Paul tells us: it is the welcoming of something that we have not pre-determined into ourselves. It is that which comes tous that engenders our faith, not that which we acquire and possess. As the ground we stand upon, faith makes our questions intelligible and meaningful. Faith is not the end of our questioning, but its beginning.

The faith the Word creates is itself the fullness of a life. In Romans 4, Abraham is treated as the paradigmatic representative of faithful obedience, as revealed by his “hope against hope” that God would be faithful to his promise. “He did not waver in unbelief,” Paul suggests, but “grew strong in faith” through giving glory to God. Yet his strength is not denial or dismissiveness; it frees him to consider the implausible circumstances that the word was given in. Paul notes that he “contemplated his own body” and the “deadness of Sarah’s womb,” ruminating and reflecting about the barrenness of the world by way of preparing for the miraculous, creative activity of God. It is this sort of faith that is the mark of *new creations,* this faith that ushers us into the abundant goodness of the fullness of life.[[74]](#footnote-74)

By faith, we introduced into a country that has been discovered before us but that we see for the first time. It is a country mapped by Scripture and the creeds, a country where our first and last movement is prayer and where our questions conform to that cadence. But a map and the world are not the same, and while Scripture and the creeds guide our exploring, they do not put an end to it.

Like any place, this land too has its limits and boundaries, which give it a unique and distinctive character. When we join in the “credo” that marks off the people of God, some paths no longer become relevant possibilities for inquiry in the same way. We cannot, for instance, “suspend judgment” on whether Christianity is true as though we are standing beyond and outside of it and rendering a verdict in the court of law. As Austin Farrer put it, “You might as well recommend to a husband the rational duty of suspending judgment about his wife’s fidelity until he has tested it by a sufficient number of ingenious traps and artificial maneuvers.” It is the creed that makes us who we are, which means all our questioning happens within its borders[[75]](#footnote-75).

Questions that we pursue within the life of faith take on a different tenor and feel. We wonder what it means for God to exist, but with the background knowledge that he actually does. That does not invalidate our inquiries or arguments, or make them less than reasonable: if anything, it should help us find new and more interesting ones than those we’ve already come up with. For we shall start to see reasons everywhere for what we know to be true, and we can listen and deliberate patiently among those who disagree with an openness that those whose belief is reductionistic simply cannot. But even so, we do not stand outside our faith and weigh it in the balance. We instead question differently, and in some cases ask different questions, out of our commitment to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

For while the creed establishes the topography of the land which we inherit, it does not necessarily exhaustively explain it or immediately bring us to see it. When those who dwell in the land love it and its occupants, then faith takes the shape of inquiry and pursues its proper end: the joyful good of loving understanding.

**Chapter Five: What Counts as Satisfaction**

My first two years after university, I spent hundreds of hours leading high school students in discussions as part of a supplemental education program for home schoolers.[[76]](#footnote-76) The conversations varied widely, as the reading list took us everywhere from the role of women in society to the nature of the American political founding. Few subjects went unexplored, and while I did my best to keep them away from controversy, we somehow kept finding our way there.[[77]](#footnote-77) I have noidea how it happened.

Most of my students were new to the loosely structured intellectual environment that the discussions created. And many of them were quickly frustrated by the format. I would open class with a question about their reading, and they would set about answering it. Or try to, anyway. When they were still getting the hang of things, they would wander about in circles, growing increasingly frustrated at the (ostensible) lack of “progress.” My students trusted me, but then they didn’t have much of a choice. Because while I was happy to explain my methods, I fiercely refused to give them any answers.

My reluctance to tell them what to think—or even what *I* thought—was a source of no little irritation for them, but I have to confess that I wasn’t particularly concerned by their plight. In my worst moments, it was even a source of some mischievous amusement for me. I wanted them to be more aware of what they didn’t know than what they did. I was more concerned to hear them ask a question well than find a hurried answer. Answers to the questions we most care deeply about often seem impossibly elusive, and to communicate otherwise to my students by playing the guru and providing cheap answers would do them a gross disservice. From the first moment I started teaching, I treated my students as those who needed to think and inquire like adults. And so I expected them to behave.

Besides, watching the proverbial lightbulb go off was such a precious experience that I didn’t want to shortchange any of us from it. High school students are fun because they don’t have the sober, pretentious self-consciousness that we sometimes adopt as we grow old, so when moments of insight finally arrive they don’t hold back. When they catch a glimpse of a meaningful answer, you can see it on their face: the impulse to speak wells up within them until it spills over into words. The torrent that is released is rarely as coherent and compelling as it seemed in their heads, but that doesn’t matter much—and students get better at articulating themselves with practice. The sheer joy that prompts them to shout their metaphorical “Eureka!” is a foreign or forgotten experience to many of us, but when it takes hold it is a true wonder.

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There’s a hilarious scene in that beacon of the American comedic tradition, *Parks and Recreation,* where the incompetent, mentally childlike millionaire Bobby Newportis debating the show’s hero for a spot on the city council. In his closing statement, Newport makes his appeal with a sense of candor that would be refreshing from a politician:

How do we fix this town?  I have no idea.  You tell me.  That's what I'm counting on.  You telling me.  I will ask lots of questions.  You give me answers.  Questions are great, but answers are better.  And answers phrased as questions—is how you play Jeopardy.

Serious comedy. Clearly*.[[78]](#footnote-78)* But Newport nails precisely how we think about things: Questions are great, but answers really are better.

Want evidence? Look at our educational system. For the most part, teachers hand out rewards for the answers students give, not the questions that they ask. By the time my students arrived in high school, they were proficient in the art of providing ready-made answers[[79]](#footnote-79) to prefabricated questions[[80]](#footnote-80). Teacher asks question, students answer, rinse and repeat.[[81]](#footnote-81) That approach never cost students anything, except maybe a few hours of cramming (if even that). And it certainly didn’t teach them to come up with questions themselves, or what some people call “thinking.”

Answer may sometimes be “better,” but they are not enough. I remember one class in particular when a particularly sharp student spoke up after I asked my opening question. What followed was every discussion leader’s worst nightmare: my masterfully crafted lead-in (and my plans for the class) were both dispensed with by the student’s equally masterful, impressively thorough, true answer*.* I was in awe, frankly, and unsure of how to respond. So after a deliberate pause, I said it was an interesting thought and promptly asked everyone else for their take on things. Over the course of the discussion, the young lady who had initially responded made several less impressive arguments for her position. But by the end, she realized the rest of the class had circled around to where she had begun.

I wasn’t being mischievous or even trying to make a point. But neither she nor the class really ended up in the “same” place at all, even though the sentence that answered the question at the beginning and the end used the exact same words. Through the questioning and reason-giving that went on, everyone began to see the issue with a little more clarity and focus. At the beginning, the student could give the right answer but not the reasons for it—or at least not very well. Others read the right parts of the text but didn’t grasp the nuances. Some would come around to the answer, but not understand its terms. Which is to say, the class may have begun by being correct. But they ended in understanding. It may look like the same place, but the growth that goes on between makes a world of difference.

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Facts are cheap. We have access to every piece of information and every data point that we could possibly want through the internet. As a raw material, information has almost no value anymore. In some areas that are time-sensitive, like finance and the news, getting data quickly still demands a premium. But for most of us, the only cost of accessing information is the constant and inescapable presence of advertising.

What we need is the ability bring those facts together into a compelling narrative. That sort of synthetic act of understanding, of seeing how pieces of information work togetherand make a meaningful whole, is a skill that no amount of Googling will ever teach us.[[82]](#footnote-82) Understanding and the ability to pursue it is the currency of our increasingly fragmented world; demand for it has skyrocketed as the volume of accessible information has increased.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Understanding requires intimacy with a subject. It is the fruit of a sympathetic attentiveness. And it also comes in degrees—one may understand astrophysics more than another, but both would certainly understand more than me. And sometimes, the fullness of understanding requires living inside a subject and seeing it from within. We might understand how baseball works on the surface: three strikes makes an out, three outs in an inning, and baserunners advance a base on a balk. But the game’s texture and dynamics often remain opaque to people who have never had first-hand familiarity with the players and clubhouse[[84]](#footnote-84). They do not see how the game *really* works*,* how all the moving parts work together and how the “intangibles” play out on the field.

Searching for information on Google is easy: pursuing understanding is hard. The former meets a felt need quickly and without effort. But the latter, well, it enables us to live well. Google may solve an immediate information gap, but the question of how we shall live, of what sort of friends we should seek, whether we should give our money to a charity in Africa or to the homeless man on the street—those are questions that demand critical reflection about our own fundamental commitments and beliefs. To answer well we must understand ourselves and the world, see how they work, and discern the peculiar shape of life to which we have been called. Google and its results might point us off in a new direction, but they cannot do more than that.

Compared to the easy answers to surface questions, the long, tumultuous, and frequently painful work of seeking understanding seems really hard and generally useless. I understand why my students kicked against my methods and occasionally complained that I was being “mean.” Their habits of mind have, like all of us, been trained in a very different direction. But questioning well means more than “finding an answer” so that we can simply get on with our lives. Those who undertake the pursuit must at some point move from answers to understanding, from the momentary satisfaction of an ephemeral desire to the plodding, difficult labor of discerning how our world works so we can live well within it.

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The lovable and surprisingly mature comic strip Peanuts had a character, Lucy, who would occasionally show up behind a lemonade stand—as any child might. But Lucy didn’t sell lemonade: she sold answers and psychological advice for the pretty penny of five cents. Her most regular customer, the endearingly depressive Charlie Brown, appeared on September 22nd of 1963 and asked her what someone should do when they don’t fit in and life seems to be passing them by. Lucy leads him to the top of a hill and engages him in a mini-Socratic dialogue:

“See the horizon over there? See how big this world is? See how much room there is for everybody? Have you ever seen any other worlds? *No.* As far as you know, this is the only world there is, right? *Right.* There are no other worlds for you to live in…right? *Right.* You were born to live in this world…right? *Right.*

The dialogue concludes with Lucy at her most forceful: “WELL, LIVE IN IT THEN!” she shouts while Charlie flips backwards. It’s an amusing and powerful answer. Probably worth more than the five cents Lucy demands for her services.

Answers provide us with a strong sense of comfort. And the more answers we have—the more understanding we acquire—the more at home we begin to feel. It’s easy to distinguish those who really understand something from those who don’t. People who really “know their stuff” will be able to speak with a quiet confidence and authority. But answers also help us “live in it then.” A robust, truthful framework will help us avoid the occasionally debilitating paralysis that reflective, questioning people can suffer from.

Searching for an answer is a bit like wandering about without quite knowing where we are going. Our reliance on maps means we don’t often feel the frustrations of getting lost. But it can be enormously taxing. We wander about, half-recognizing things but still uncertain whether they are really them. We take off in one direction, only to arrive back where we started. The sense of progress is both halting and sometimes simply wrong. But when we arrive and know again where we are and where we are going—the relief and comfort it provides is euphoric.

It’s no wonder, then, that we’re willing to shell out a lot of money to get the answers we want. Many of us (rightly) have yielded the task of questioning ourselves and our ways to the professionalized realm of the counselor or therapist’s office. We pay a good deal more than Lucy’s fee. But the guide through the wilderness turns out, in many cases, to be more than worth it.

Others go in for the low cost solution, outsourcing their questions to the sprawling self-help industry. We set up gurus and follow them, buying their ready-made solutions to life’s deepest problems. It’s a quick-fix we’re after, a near-googlable form of answer to questions that deserve lifetimes of exploration. I don’t mean to sound disdainful, as understand the motivation. It’s easy to rail against being “therapeutic” without appreciating the sort of comfort the tidy, endless affirmations provide.

Besides, the low-cost answer booth mentality pervades our Christian culture. We want our pastors to dispense answers the way advice columnists pass out advice: by giving us just enough so we know what to do, but not so much that we have to think. We have our own Christian advice industry, with its gurus and its “tribes” and its ready-to-order fixes. The advice may be better than other books and even quite biblical. But even books are titled to address the “consumers” “felt need” so that you will buy them. I spent a year dialoguing about a book project with a major Christian publisher, which they liked and thought was good work on an important topic. But they rejected it because they didn’t know have a “hook” to market it with.[[85]](#footnote-85) I understand the need for books to sell. But the Christian market is so therapeutically motivated that publishers feel obligated to play the Oprah game just so they can stay afloat.

What’s more, some in our leadership seem reasonably content with that state of affairs. I was once given the opportunity to contribute to a statement by the National Association of Evangelicals. During the deliberations, one leader in the room suggested that Christians lead such busy lives that they don’t care about careful theological documents: they simply want to be told what to do. If that is true, it’s a damning indictment of North American Christianity—and of some of its leadership’s willingness to capitulate to that mentality.[[86]](#footnote-86)

Of course, knowing what to do isn’t bad. In fact, it’s important to know what to do—and important seek sound advice for it. That’s not what I am worried about. My concern is that our answer-dispensing industrial complex is short-circuiting the work of forming people capable of finding answers on their own. If we want people to think adult thoughts, then we should stop catering to their felt needs for quick answers.

Take my own work as a writer. I see why writers and pastors read C.S. Lewis. I have read him for years and have an ardent admiration for him. But my love for Lewis and desire to emulate him have moved me to read what he read*,* to learn from those who taught him. The only way we become like those we love is by imitating them, which means not resting content with the answers they provide but learning to ask the questions that they asked. To make the point theologically, the only way we can think like Jesus thought is by reading what Jesus read—which is why the Montanist rejection or suspicion of the Old Testament is a damnable, soul-destroying heresy.

But in our contemporary pedagogy Christians are so answer oriented that we are apparently no longer capable of coming up with any questions on our own.[[87]](#footnote-87) Again, look at our publishing industry.[[88]](#footnote-88) We should think it something of a miracle that anyone learned anything about the Bible before we had study guides for it. What questions could the early Christians have possibly asked without all the prompts we now have? And how did readers ever learn from books without authors providing them the questions they should ask at the end of each chapter?[[89]](#footnote-89) If we are going to move beyond being a community that simply regurgitates “easy answers,” then we must also be willing to stop spoonfeeding the questions.

The corner of Christianity that has valued answers the most—apologetics—has busied themselves coming up with arguments for the faith while equipping loyal adherents with the tools to do the same. They’ve done enormous good, and have instilled countless Christians with a good deal of healthy confidence. And as the Anglican preacher Austin Farrer once pointed out, “what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned.” The task of countering objections to Christianity is an ancient vocation, and we ought not let it go now.

But all that work has teetered on the edge of overcompensating for the anti-intellectual strains in American Christianity and the rise of a noisy atheist opposition. The first and most important aim of the Christian intellect is not to defend the answers we affirm but to work to understand them ourselves. Confidence flows from understanding, and understanding is the intellectual fruit of love. The more we treat answers and arguments as tools and techniques to improve our witness to the lost, rather than as moments in our own formation as obedient and loving disciples, the less able we will be to speak confidently and authoritatively while still maintaining a humble awareness of the limits of our own knowledge.

What’s more, too much of a focus on answers and arguments in apologetics makes us inattentive to the questions being asked. When defense is the first impulse, it short-circuits the work of understanding. Which ironically makes it harder to engage in the spirited, lively, and open discussion with those who think about the world very differently than we do. The instinctive disposition will be to reach into the argumentative bag of tricks to defend our position rather than attentively listening and arguing in love.[[90]](#footnote-90)

We can only work to understand that which we have initially grasped in outline. Which means we have to start with answers, even if we don’t end there. And here the recovery of the practice of catechesis is one of the most hopeful signs for Christians interested in leading an excellently questioning life. Christians have used catechisms to train those new to the faith in the fundamentals. Answers were often memorized by the respondent, with the goal of internalizing them and making a context for a lively dialogue with the teacher. If Christians recover the practice, we will find our questions will become more sophisticated because of the frameworks we have seen through. The model is a good one for apologetics, too: answers almost never persuade people, at least not on their own. But internalizing them through a lays a helpful foundation that allows for a more lively and productive back-and-forth of questioning together.

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It’s tempting for those who first pick up questions to think that answers get in the way. It’s an old temptation, one that William Blake had no friendly words for:

To cast off the idiot Questioner, who is always questioning

But never capable of answering, who sits with a sly grin

Silent plotting when to question, like a thief in a cave;

Who publishes doubt and calls it knowledge.

Questioning everything can’t even rise to the level of a virtue: it’s an impossibility, actually, and unintelligible as long as the practice is ordered toward understanding. If we question whether the world exists we will find that all other questions dry up. If we do not (momentarily, at least!) assume that language works then we shall find ourselves without it as we wonder about anything else.

In his dialogue *Meno,* Plato points out that if we know what we are searching for, then we have no reason to search for it. If we have already determined how lightbulbs work, in other words, then it won’t come up as a question. On the other side of the dilemma, if we *don’t* know what we’re looking for then we’ll never be able to search for it. Think of it this way: suppose you’re looking to pick someone up from the airport you’ve never met and have never seen a photo of. How do you know if you’ve met the right person? It’s wholly possible that you might bump elbows without realizing it.

One way through that puzzle is to point out that in many cases, we do know somethingabout the unknown. For instance, we know *that* something is unknown to us. And running backward to my idea about “negative space,” we have an outline around the unknown that helps us recognize the right answer when we finally come upon it. The more fine-grained and detailed our outline is, the easier finding the answer will be. In the airport case above, we may not have seen the fellow before. And if we’ve been given a vague description (“tall and blonde hair”) then we’re basically leaning on luck. The more thorough the profile becomes the easier finding him will be.

Which means questioning well requires presuppositions: we cannot explore the shape of the unknown except by more clearly distilling what we doknow, the commitments that wehave. A question sends our mind into the world on an expedition, as it were, but we still come fromsomewhere. We raise our question from within a framework, which shapes the sort of answers we look for.

One of the effects of this is that not everyone will find our questions equally interesting because they do not share our commitments and beliefs. Whether hell exists and whether anyone is in it are important questions for Christians. But they have a good deal less purchase outside our community *as* questions. The ideas may in fact take the form of objections, in fact, as reasons not to be a Christian. The different background commitments changes everyone’s relationship to the idea. Christians may not be able to make their beliefs perfectly intelligible to others, or even to themselves. But as we have lots of other reasons to believe the doctrine can be resolved in a meaningful and truthful way, the pursuit can remain open as a question that we continue to plod through.

The limited and partial understanding that we come to through our lives actually cause us to close down some possible paths. When I got married, it closed off the question of whether I was the marrying type. And unless my wife were to become abusive maniac—which turns out to be as ludicrous in print as it sounded in my head—I am not free to “weigh the evidence” about divorce as though it were a fifty-fifty proposition for me. I need no further evidence to know that the path is closed. From the moment I said “till death do us part,” the commitment formed the backbone of my understanding of my relationships and obligations, and any line of inquiry that meaningfully deviated from that was transformed into a weakness or a temptation. In Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales,* the knight puts his wife through an excruciating series of tests to determine her fidelity to him. But the suspicious hostility behind requiring someone to “prove” their love in order to shore up the marriage vow gets the order of things precisely backward. Love is discerned precisely when it is given, when we make the commitment beforehand and pursue it even to our own great pain.

Of course, I still wonder about my marriage. But the questions have changed, have moved me more toward exploring the thing itself. We have found ourselves together: how shall we make the best of it? Have I done all that I can to create an environment of warmth and trust? What is it with women and wicker baskets anyway? How have we ended up *here,* so busy with our lives with what seems like so little time to talk? Why is it so much harder now than it was on day one to keep little irritations from becoming major flareups? Why do all the joys seem so much deeper now, so much more enduring—even though they’re still mixed up with occasional moments of pain and distance?

The way we we form our lives makes some questions more prominent while pushing others to the margins. Questioning well depends on us having some intellectual stability, a sort of “home base” that allows us to undertake our intellectual expeditions. We may find ourselves slowly shifting our core convictions and changing the questions accordingly. But there can be no questions if there are no commitments. For regardless of its content, faith is the necessary foundation from which understanding is pursued.

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“Jesus is the answer.” Yes, but what that means depends entirely on the question.[[91]](#footnote-91) When Christian teenagers enter the university, the “Sunday school answers” that had once served them well all of a sudden start to seem trite and simplistic.[[92]](#footnote-92) For some, their introduction into a more critical, reflective approach to the answers they learned in Sunday school devolves into dismissing them altogether. Others transform their faith from cliche into cliche, adopting more sophisticated truisms to replace the old versions.

But “Jesus is the answer” doesn’t have to be a cop-out or cliche. For some, it sounds a triumphal resolution to a lot of hard-nosed inquiry into life’s most difficult questions. What sort of God could possibly allow suffering? (Answer: A God willing to subject himself to it.) How shall we remake a broken and sinful world? (Answer: We shan’t, for all that will live must also die. But God.) And there are others. The longer we spend working through those questions, the more prepared we will be to hear its transformative power when the simplicity of the Gospel invades our minds. In that moment, “Jesus is the answer” ceases to be a cliche and is transformed into a reverential, joyfully exuberant affirmation of the glorious reality of God’s love.

I remember one such moment as an undergraduate, a moment that lingered long enough to propel me to write my first book. I had spent an entire weekend dialoguing about Plato’s *Symposium* with peers and professors. By 2:30 AM on Monday morning, many of my peers had (reasonably) decided to rest, leaving only a few very close friends and two professors in the room. We explored the interrelated tensions Plato felt between the body and soul, and the city and the individual, never quite coming to a meaningful resolution but taking into ourselves the full weight of the problem. We spent the conversation charitably attempting to bridge the divides Plato introduces within the intellectual world he constructs.

Plato pursued questions as well as anyone else. There’s a reason why the nineteenth century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead famously described the history of philosophy as a series of “footnotes to Plato.” But on the questions above, Plato couldn’t find a workable solution. That would only come in the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. In our conversation, the fact of the Incarnation kept pressing itself upon us, as though it simply could not be ignored. We resisted the “easy answer,” to be honest, to see if the solution could be found in other ways. But each turn and attempt only renewed my appreciation for the singular miracle that God became man.[[93]](#footnote-93)

The witness of the Gospel turned Platonism on its head by offering a solution that Plato could never have imagined. But if the question goes deep enough into a conceptual framework, if it is a so-called “hard question,” that is precisely what an answer can do. They inaugurate new paradigms, opening up new avenues of inquiry and allowing new questions to be pursued. The early Christians did not quit thinking once they gained the answer of Jesus. They simply changed the questions, which invigorated an intellectual world that had otherwise come to exhaustion.[[94]](#footnote-94) In attempting to understand the salvation they received, Christians set about exploring who Jesus was. They were fruitful lines of inquiry and so they remain.

Plato’s questions are not necessarily the Bible’s questions—even if it so happens that Jesus answers them as well. It is a sign of the providential grace of God that the paths that lead us to Jesus aren’t necessarily the same that we walk down once we are found by him. The Bible has its own set of questions, which we learn to ask as well the moment we come to Jesus we. As in, how should we understand Jesus’ sacrificial death? While we are able to grasp some of its meaning without the Old Testament, the atonement is only properly understood within the context in which it was given: it makes no sense to speak of Jesus as the “Lamb of God” without understanding the rituals of sacrifice and absolution for Israel’s transgressions in the Torah.[[95]](#footnote-95)

Of course, there are some questions for which a sentence, or even a cluster of ideas, seems wholly unsatisfactory. Consider marriage: is it a good worth sacrificing singleness for? We might make ourselves a “pro/con” list with all the reasons for and against. But that’s a reductionistic approach (even if loved by deciders everywhere). The question is so important and the cultural pressures against marriage so unavoidably strong that a list of “pros” will look a little thin. The goods of marriage only clearly appear within the context of a life and the stories that flow out of it. It is the witness of those couples who have faced their problems and found joys beyond them that will help us meaningfully resolve the question.[[96]](#footnote-96)

The parable of the Good Samaritan is the answer to a question: “And who is my neighbor?” The details are well known: Jesus’ story causes him to flip the question on its head. After telling it, he replies, “Which of these three…proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” The story doesn’t simply “answer the question,” though it does do that. It highlights the more fundamental problem, which is that the question was wrong from the start. It existed within a narrative of self-righteousness that was fundamentally wrong.[[97]](#footnote-97)

Such is also the “answer” of Jesus, which contains the announcement and invitation within it and makes them intelligible for us. Through the hearing and retelling of the story of Jesus, it becomes for us a story that we also live.[[98]](#footnote-98) The proclamation of his life, death, and resurrection is itself an invitation to follow, for to properly understand it requires seeing the world from within the context of his life. Which is why his first word is one of repentance, in which he bids us to leave our lives behind and take up his instead. The story of Jesus is a truthful answer. But it is a truth that is understood from within, as we walk in the footsteps of the one who also declares himself the way.

**Chapter Five: The Strangeness of the World and the World of our Questioning**

How should the fact that the author the fourth Gospel describes himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” determine our understanding of it?

And with that, I opened six hours of examining the Gospel according to John with my high school students. As starter questions go, it has all sorts of problems. It’s simultaneously too narrow and too complex, and it presupposes a lot of knowledge about John’s account. All of which made it a bit of a rough start out of the gates, though things improved once we were well underway.

The question’s one strength is that it seems a little unusual. It’s not the sort of question that a reader picking up the Gospel for the first time would likely come up with. And maybe not the fifteenth time, either, which is closer to the situation I was facing. Most of my students had been raised in the church and knew (or thought they did) the story inside and out. My students responded with a collective, “Huh!?” Nothing about the question made it into their pre-class notes. But the direction the it sets us off in turns out to be quite fruitful, leading to lots of interesting thoughts about love and testimony. But I admittedly was crawling through a backdoor into the text, rather than approaching it head on.[[99]](#footnote-99)

It’s hard to have interesting and meaningful conversations about the Bible with Christians.[[100]](#footnote-100) *Really* hard. Biblical literacy isn’t a strong point of American culture, but most active small group participants have a healthy familiarity with the Bible. Rather than make for more interesting discussions, though, it often has the reverse effect. People who know the “right answers” often think that’s enough.[[101]](#footnote-101) Or people feel like they *should* have the right answers, making them reluctant to speak up. I think there is an appropriate reverence we need to cultivate while walking through the deep things of God. But we ought not let that calcify into a fearful foreclosing of our need for grace, either. If we *never* learn where we have been wrong then we may have deceived ourselves into thinking we no longer have anything to learn.

My goal when teaching my students was twofold: I wanted to ask a question that my students didn’t think they already knew the answer to, and I wanted to make the familiar seem strange. What they had seen straight, I wanted them to see crooked. What they had known, I wanted them to unknow—or at least *feel* like they didn’t know anymore. Where they had accepted givens, I wanted to introduce questions. My hope was that they would be surprised by the text and its depths, that they would wake up to its power to reframe their lives. I longed for the world of Scripture to seem strange and wonderful, to disrupt and put to death their platitudes and cliches.

When we first launch into this world, everything is a miracle. The home is a marvel and each of its corners a mystery. The most mundane objects become to children momentary sources of joy. As children learn words, their exploration and inquiry takes the form of questions, which many children do a lot. One study found children who asked one to three questions every minute.[[102]](#footnote-102)To them, the world a strange and fascinating place.

As we grow old, though, what once awed begins to irritate. “Familiarity breeds contempt,” we tell ourselves, as though that tired line somehow excused our impatience. The world loses its liveliness for us, its peculiarity and its humor. The enchantment runs out of things and takes the fun of exploring along with it. We slowly give up on our exploring, leaving the adventures of learning and growth to our wistful retellings of the “college years.”

Questioning reopens the world to us, though, and opens us to the world. It makes us alive, helping us notice the hidden goodness around us while reminding us of just how much we have to grow. As we set out on our explorations, we enter into a world not of our making—a world that if we allow it will remake us.

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Children take their own existence “for granted,” as it were, as a given. And so they should, for we interact with the world by way of the habits, traditions, and ways of seeing things that we tacitly adopt from our parents and peers. “Home is where one starts from,” T.S. Eliot put it, which is a lovely and truthful phrase. When we undertake an intellectual expedition we have to begin from somewhere.

It is true that intellectual homesteading has fallen into disrepute within certain “progressive” factions. Richard Dawkins, who has assumed the arch-atheist title, mused in *The God Delusion* that it might always be “a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about.”

The idea that children must make up their own minds on questions like religion is a fantasy, though. It’s quite reasonable to start out without having chosen all the beliefs we possess, largely because we don’t “possess” beliefs in the way Dawkins’ language suggests. We don’t pick and choose beliefs off the belief-rack, as though they were bits of clothing that we can put on or not. We inhabit them, forming and reforming them through our interactions with the world and our critical reflection about it. They possess *us,* setting the boundaries for our lives and shaping our dispositions.[[103]](#footnote-103) And that process simply isn’t as straightforwardly conscious as Dawkins makes it seem: we are acclimatized as children into presuming the world exists, and no one seems troubled by *that*. Yet no one is prepared to say that parents who are Berkleyan idealists are committing a form of “child abuse” for exercising their freedom to raise their children as they see fit.

Even imperfect upbringings can provide young people with a sense of identity and belonging. When we know well the place we come from, it is easier to step out into the unknown. Those who are raised in communities with strong identities, where to be a member of that community *means* approaching the world in a particular way, are often able to take more risks because they have a viable support network to fall into.

So also with intellectual homes. Those who begin questioning the world out of stable and robust frameworks—even if not *completely* true—will be more capable of genuinely questioning their understandings and opening themselves to new ideas than those who do not. As Luigi Giussani writes, the student “can be genuinely open and truly sympathetic only if he feels, even unconsciously, a sense of total security.[[104]](#footnote-104)” If our cognitive homes prove less sturdy than they seemed while we were growing up in them, they can be torn down and replaced.[[105]](#footnote-105) But for that to happen there must be a home first of all. The real worry that folks like Dawkins have, it seems to me, is not so much with indoctrination but with Christian doctrines. Because if some of our bricks are really true, then his bleak outlook really is not.

We begin questioning from within the outlook we tacitly adopt, and the answers we are given often reinforce that outlook[[106]](#footnote-106). The frameworks we are given don’t have to be prisons to keep us from the world. They could be rafts that we use to set out across the sea.

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The laugh started as an almost imperceptible grin, but it slowly morphed into a belly roar. It was just before my sophomore year of college and I was in the middle of driving myself from Western Washington down to Los Angeles. Somewhere north of Sacramento, I had gotten myself thinking about Christianity, as I had spent a good deal of time over the break arguing things out with my brother. Yet as I considered the nature of its central claims—that Jesus was fully God and man, that the death of Jesus 2000 years ago somehow covered the wrongs I had done, and so on—the whole thing struck me as monstrously funny, as absurd to the point of ludicrous. I wasn’t exactly “lost in wonder, love and praise” but I did feel a great deal of mirth.

The world exists outside and before our inquiry into it. And it just so happens that it is an endlessly fascinating place. I mean, earlobes are awesome. And seem totally superfluous. What exactly are those things for again? And have you read P.G. Wodehouse? I have stood outside cathedrals and reflected about gargoyles, a part of history that I still don’t understand. A friend of mine discovered a gene once. Octaves in music have ratios of 2:1, which if you ask me makes them a miracle. Do you know if you have two speakers “bumping” at the same wavelength they can cancel each other out, so that you wouldn’t hear a thing? Have you stood at the top of Niagara Falls and wondered how much water is rushing past you? Did you know some people have crossed it on a really tiny rope? Or plunged over it in a barrel? What impels a man to say, “Yes, this is the year I shall climb into a two-foot wide ring of wood and go hurtling over a several-hundred foot waterfall”? Who *are* these people?

Romance, Chesterton once said, is a mixture of “the familiar and the strange.” Any framework that domesticates the world by refusing to recognize its strangeness will eventually run out of life. It’s the sign of a healthy understanding of reality that we are able to see the unknowns as unknown, and respect them accordingly. That doesn’t mean we don’t know anything, though: it simply means that we live in the romantic tension of both knowing and not knowing, of allowing our interests to go out into the world and to delight in the experience of learning. An experience that is infinitely repeatable, with higher and more refined joys as our souls expand.

A question makes the world strange to us. It reminds us that reality has depths beyond our understanding of it, that there is no end to our growth. And as Christians, we have enough resources to go on wondering forever. Like any good home, Christianity turns out to be delightfully odd and quirky, with idiosyncracies and habits that seem downright strange to outsiders (baptism anyone?) but which make some sense from within. I mean, regardless of what happens in communion, a group of folks taking a tiny wafer and a little bit of wine or grape juice does seem *pretty* odd, doesn’t it? I sometimes think that Christians love haggling over these things in part because cheerful quarreling is what loving families do, isn’t it?

Yet the romance is only meaningful if the adventure really has consequences. The pursuit of truth and understanding is a grand drama, which may end as a comedy or not. When a man pursues a woman, he stands between marriage and refusal. But when he pursues an insight or understanding, he risks the possibility of being wrong. If it turns out that Jesus isn’t God, the whole thing would unravel pretty quickly[[107]](#footnote-107). That is not a question that Christians should make their sole focus, or that we approach with a “fifty-fifty” posture. But as we pursue understanding, we will slowly see all the reasons for and against it.

In Dostyoeskvsky’ *Brothers Karamazov,* Ivan Karamazov is put up for trial for murdering his father. The case is wonderfully strange, and draws out the many paradoxes of Karamazov’s character. All the evidence used by the prosecution is turned around and used by the defense—but within a different story, of course, one that presents a plausible alternative to the prosecution’s tale. Coming to understand Ivan means seeing all the reasons why he murdered his father—but also all the reasons why he didn’t. Were our understanding perfect, we’d have all the reasons for and against the story we are considering.

But sometimes that pursuit moves us to leave our intellectual homes behind. We discover that planks in the raft are leaky or rotten, such that it can no longer take us across the sea like we hoped. Core parts of our framework turn out to be false, and their absence or replacements introduce substantive changes in our paradigms. Such transitions often happen when people encounter questions that their own framework can no longer resolve or make sense of. The process may take the form of a crisis, or it may be a slow and long evolution of views. But we move, intellectually, into newer and (we hope) more truthful confines.

This is a hard process, though, that feels like a sort of homelessness. Our framework orients us in the world: it is how we decide through our reflection and deliberation whether we shall do this or that. Calling it into question destabilizes us, almost as though our sense of place has been taken away from us. And we also lose our “insider” status in the communities that shared those commitments, which introduces a new level of unfamiliarity. Such periods of transition can be very difficult and feel very isolating, especially when we strike out on our own.

Most of the time, we ought to approach such moments with something like gratitude and reverence if the frameworks we once inhabited are still shared by those we love. A bit of Entishness (“Don’t be hasty!”) would do us all well when it comes to paradigm reorienting questions. But if we have found our beliefs to be false than we have no choice but to follow. And as Christians set out to understand all that we have been given, we must cheerfully leave that open as a possibility.

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“Nature answers,” C.S. Lewis once wrote, “the questions that are put to her.” The questions themselves and the frameworks that produce them select out what sort of answers we get back. If we only pose scientific sorts of questions, then the world will turn out mechanistic results. If we ask psychological questions, we might spend our time wondering how people feel. If history’s the thing, then…well, you do see my point, don’t you?[[108]](#footnote-108)

Questions are a bit like intellectual scavenger hunts. They send us trotting out into the world looking for an answer, but what “counts” is in a sense determined by the question we’ve asked. A passage from the Gospel of Luke, for instance, might be interesting on its own. But its completely immaterial to the question about the Gospel according to John that I started this chapter with. If we rule out the wrong questions because they are troubling or inconvenient, we’ll find ourselves with a narrow and uninteresting conception of the world.

The point goes the other direction, too: there are some questions the world renders useless or unintelligible. Unless you’re North Korea, that is, and are interested in manipulating things to buttress your pseudo-theocratic regime. The state news outlet once reported that they’d found a unicorn lair.[[109]](#footnote-109) They do that sort of thing every now and then to make their leader seem more awesome so they can control their people. But for everyone else in the world, the existence of unicorns is a question that is sufficiently closed.

The cost for that sort of manipulation is incredibly high: at some point reality intrudes on us or we experience the mental and social erosion that results from clinging to our artificial constructs. One can only believe, after all, in the Easter bunny for so long. Eventually the whole thing breaks apart. Depending on the complexity of a narrative and it’s proximity to the truth, it may take a lifetime, or longer, for those cracks to show. But show they someday will, for we have been made to integrate into reality and have reality integrated into us.

Questioning is shaped, then, by the world we discover. It would be bad form to watch a hummingbird on the feeder and pose a question on nuclear physics, at least without some explanation and justification. The question is well outside the current field of vision. But to wonder about airspeed, or the varieties of birds, or the ecological effects of birdseed, or what sort of food hummingbirds prefer—the questions are there, embedded in the events that we are witnessing if we are willing to patiently attend to them.

The world has an order, and the more we discern that order the more fitting our questions will be. To question a dog as though it were a human would be something of an intellectual *faux pas*.[[110]](#footnote-110) The local equivalent of searching for unicorn stories to support a tyrannical dictator, we might say. As we set out on our explorations, our discoveries have a reciprocal influence on us and reset, slowly but surely, the questions that we are free to take up and pursue.

But that the world is ordered doesn’t mean the order is easy to discern. Sometimes events transpire that don’t fit our categories or our understanding, which leaves us to try to make sense of them. “Thou comest to me in such a questionable shape that I will speak to thee,” is Hamlet’s line to his father, who appears as a ghost, but it fits here too.

Never are such ambiguities more pressing or difficult to sit with than in the face of horrendous evils. We question and probe and press during such moments because we intuitively expect that the ordered world is also *good.* But when infants die in the womb, or women are raped, or children suffer from starvation—the goodness of the world is transformed from a given into a question. A darkness, you might say, descends and the cheerful pursuit of understanding becomes the plodding groping after meaning. In the middle of such ambiguities, it is often hard to remember where we are or where we are going.

Ambiguities breed questions, at least as long as we are convinced they conceal beauty or goodness. Consider Mona Lisa and her ineffable countenance: the perplexing question of what the dickens her expression means has launched a thousand dissertations. The combination of the portrait’s simple beauty and the uncertainty of her expression engenders a longing in us to understand what is going on.

It’s moral ambiguities that generally cause us the most trouble, because they require a decision. We can’t hang on and wait forever for things to get clear: we must take a step forward through a situation where the right thing to do seems utterly opaque. Yet ambiguity doesn’t entail there is *no* moral order, no possibility of right or wrong before us. The paths of right and wrong through a given situation may not be clear. But then, fewer things in this world are than we might like. The right way often requires deliberation and discrimination, the ability to make distinctions and discern what the situation calls for. We might say the ability to get from LA to New York is ambiguous, but that is only true if we have no ability to read a map. Once we learn to think reflectively about ethics, we see the possible options and are able to weigh their respective strengths and merits.

The irony is that punting and claiming a “grey area” actually may close down questioning prematurely. Even if it takes us years to discover the “right thing” to do on a particular moral question, a commitment to a fundamental moral order means that we do not have the luxury of quitting the task of searching in favor of dubbing it an “exception.”[[111]](#footnote-111) That is simply to excuse ourselves from the responsibility of gaining wisdom in a confusing world. It is the commitment to moral order that keeps inquiry alive, that motivates our pursuit of understanding.

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The world is not formless and void. It does not lie inert before us, simply as matter for us to craft our meaning through the assertion of our wills. It has its own dignity, it’s own existence and shape before we ever come to it. Our questioning takes us out toward the world, to try to understand the order we discover or to discover the order we expect to be there. But for such questioning to go on, there must be a world to be explored. We live facing it, directed outward toward it—and as we make our inquiries into it, our inquiries make us.

I know it’s simplistic to say that the world really is there, but it turns out that if we deny it then our inquiry takes on a considerably different atmosphere. Cynicism sees *through*. Understanding sees *how* and *why.* If the point is to see the world as it is (rather than make it how we want it to be) then we must reach a point that we can grab hold of. As C.S. Lewis wrote:

The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to `see through' first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To `see through' all things is the same as not to see.

Even if everything in creation dissolved into the ether, we would still be left with God, the “first principle” who grounds all knowledge and understanding. Unless our cynical skepticism is going to mature into the vanity of an outright nihilism, then we would do well to turn away from it and onto the path toward understanding.

Our understanding can never be so comprehensive as to somehow close off our growth. We are only one part of the world, and we examine it from within. Which means that our vision is always limited. As Joseph Ratzinger has written, the world is “continually outstripping our capacity to *apprehend* and reading out to a recognition of the way in which we are comprehended.” Our vision isn’t yet strong enough to find the resting place of God. But in his freedom he lifted us to himself, by becoming incarnate as one of us.

One of the distinctive features of feeling at home is knowing precisely where we are. To have a place, to “fit in”—it’s something that goes beyond a comfortable familiarity with something. We may be familiar with our in-laws without ever really feeling at home with them. And some of us have found a place outside our families, among our friends or (ideally and idealistically) within the community of the church. We know we have found a place when we have some sense of the whole and have found our spot within it.

The closest I have come to all this was the night I proposed to my wife. I was particularly anxious about the proposal, to the point of praying for a unique sense of calm so that I would have an added measure of confidence that God was with us.[[112]](#footnote-112) I can’t point to many specific prayers in my life that were unambiguously answered, but that was one. As I proposed, a remarkable awareness that all would be well came over me—a peace that transcended understanding, you might say. Words fail me right at this point: all I know is that my wife’s “yes” and the rejoicing in heaven that accompanied it was a good powerful enough to overcome all the suffering I could possibly know. All things were made clear to me in that moment: I knew where I was from and where I had come to.[[113]](#footnote-113)

As Christians, we are able to search out all things precisely because they have been already been comprehended by God. We can make our home in the universe because the universe has been given to us in Christ. “All things are yours,” Paul tells us, because we are Christ’s and Christ is God’s. If we give ourselves in faith to the one who revealed himself in the tragic goodness of the cross, we shall find stepping into a strange and wonderful land as children newly arrived into the world. Our particular lines of inquiry may take us to the outer reaches of the cosmos or to the deepest corners of the soul—but in each direction, with each step we will learn to see and delight in the goodness of God’s handiwork.

The whole is bounded by God himself: he is both the center of our inquiry and its substance. As the medievals understood, God is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference does not exist. All that we understand is given to us. We grasp and strive and attempt to stake out a claim that we can call our “own,” but the land beneath our feet is a gift and the freedom to explore is bounded by the providential grace of God.

In the person of Jesus and the authorized witness to his life and meaning, we are provided a glimpse from the promontory wherein the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost dwell. “He who has seen me has seen the Father,” he tells his disciples. We have heard often in recent years about the parable of the blind men each grasping a different bit of an elephant, and each thinking he’s the only one. That they are all grasping the same animal is miracle enough: the puzzle might be more interesting if one had a kangaroo while the other a koala.[[114]](#footnote-114) But the story of the Incarnation suggests that the narrator drops into the story and then helps us to see.[[115]](#footnote-115) Like the blind fellow whom Jesus heals *twice* in order to restore his sight, truthful understanding may not be instantaneous or easy. But few things in this life worth having can be truly reached without effort.

The more we look outward from the life of the Triune God that we have been adopted into, the more clearly we will see everything else. For the one who died for the world is the one in whom all things hold together. And Christ is not only our salvation; he is also our *wisdom,* the one who empowers us through his indwelling Spirit to see our way through.

There is no end of exploring the deep things of God. When we find ourselves within them, they are a source of endless wonder and even the occasional moments of mirth. Their paradoxes and puzzles have proved to be the stuff of 2000 years’ intellectual reflection and development, making them if nothing else the among the most fruitfullines of inquiry that have ever been opened. And the startling paradox of the incarnation means that we set out to explore the things of heaven we find ourselves cheerfully considering the things of earth. For when we look out through the story of God’s gracious action, we find ourselves and the world encompassed by a creed that goes beyond us all.

**Chapter Six: The Liberation of Questioning**

You might say my relationship with the high school pastor was tenuous*.* But that would be understating things: it was a rocky road for us, which was mostly my fault. As the pastor’s son, I was a terror in Bible studies. It wasn’t simply that I thought I was right, though I often did. I was self-consciously striving to know more about the Bible than anyone else[[116]](#footnote-116) in the room and always pleased to demonstrate it when the need arose.

Which makes thisparticular incident a little more understandable, even if not excusable. It was a Sunday morning and our little group was trudging through the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Our leader, a recent college graduate with aspirations to be a punk-rock drummer,[[117]](#footnote-117) made a point of reminding us that the Holy Spirit didn’t arrive around these parts until Pentecost.

Now, until that point in our relationship most of my questions had stemmed from my desire to woo pretty girls who loved Jesus by demonstrating my keen Biblical insight.[[118]](#footnote-118) This time, though, I had a moment of genuine confusion. The facts simply didn’t seem to fit the theory, as they say, so I piped up: “But if the Holy Spirit didn’t come to earth at all until Pentecost, how can David plead in Psalm 51 not to have the Holy Spirit taken away from him?” I didn’t doubt his teaching. I simply didn’t understand it. It was quite possibly the only real question I asked in all my high school years.

It did not go over well. With a startling note of hostility, he abruptly told me to go ask my father (whom he had clearly decided was a professional failure), on grounds that he was simply providing the “standard dispensationalist teaching.[[119]](#footnote-119)” And then, with a huff, he moved on. The moment left a mark, though. Two things were strikingly clear: he had no idea how to answer my question, and he clearly felt it was a challenge to his authority.

Our questions are inseparable from our histories. They don’t simply float above us, angelic-like in the ether. The meaning of our questions is tied to the stories of our lives and the habits and practices of thought that have formed us. We have *this* particular interest in part because we were formed in *that* particular way or have *that* particular belief. Had I not been (happily) raised in a biblically literate household, the question never would have struck me. And had I not made for myself the reputation for being pretentious, I suspect my youth pastor might not have been so demeaning.

Questioning is rooted in what we love, in the goods we consciously and unconsciously orient our lives around and desire. Growing up, my questions were frequently motivated not an interest the answer *per se* but in my eagerness to impress. And candidly, I worry that many of them still are*.* Having recently returned to school for a graduate degree, it is terrifying and fascinating how easy our ambition shapes our pursuits, rather than our desire for understanding in itself.

As a form our loves take, questioning faces all the corruption and corrosion that happens in a sinful world. We cannot assume intellectual purity, in other words, especially of ourselves. All that we ask and all that we don’t ask are subject to the domains of judgment and grace. For just as our love for people has its lustful distortions, so also our love and desire for truth.

Such misguided loves shape the communities we inhabit, which then conversely reinforce those loves. My own prideful posturing and my youth pastor’s authoritarian dismissal stood in the way of our ability to inquire together. He had no eyes to see the sincerity of my confusion, and I was frustrated he couldn’t detect it. But we also made questioning more difficult for everyone else. As someone with influence, my pseudo-questioning created an environment where truth wasn’t valued for its own sake. And my youth pastor’s insecurities made it harder for him to see when questions were subversive and when they were not, which meant only the approved questions could be asked.

Questioning needs liberation. We can’t simply take up inquiry as part of our formation without seeing the ways in which it too has become entangled in a fallen heart and the structures of a fallen world. If we fail to orient the practice appropriately—around the gracious actions of God and the authorized witness to them—then we will simultaneously fail to cultivate the virtues and communities that we need to question well.

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The first public talk I gave after writing my book on the physical body, I got smoked. I was speaking at Redemption in Phoenix, a well-educated and wealthy community, and the questions went to the heart of the dilemma of embodiment: how can we specify which practices are clearly “Christian” (like prayer and fasting) without tearing asunder the sacred and secular?[[120]](#footnote-120) It counts as a “hard question,” even for someone who has written a book on the subject. And while I muddled my way through I could tell I was less than convincing. I wasn’t offended: if anything, I was impressed they had seen the force of such a foundational question and were willing to take it up with me.

It wasn’t until six months later that I really learned to value questions as a speaker, though. I had been asked to do some online teaching for Underground University, which provides biblical training for North Korean refugees. The attendees had spent years in the totalitarian regime, and had been taught that asking questions simply meant challenging the teacher’s authority. Throw in their lack of expressiveness and it was nearly impossible to tell whether they were interested at all. I have never been so eager for a question from a student, but when one finally came they wanted to know whether America is a Christian nation.[[121]](#footnote-121)

The North Korean regime *has* to teach that questions undermine authority because the moment they allow them their elaborately constructed lies will begin to be exposed. “What a tangled web we weave,” is the old saying, but it’s a lot easier to keep it all together if no one’s allowed to think. But the North Korean option on questions is a temptation that all public figures and pastors share. We don’t build regimes based on what we believe—or we shouldn’t, anyway—but we do build our livelihoods. Christian leaders often get paid for what they know, which tempts them toward becoming gurus who dispense intellectual and life advice. But that means innocent questions that go beyond the leader’s ability will feel more accusatory or subversive than they actually might be.[[122]](#footnote-122) If we’re getting paid for what we know, after all, and a question plants in someone’s mind the possibility that we *don’t*….what then?

The temptation leaders face, though, is a more aggressive form of what we all struggle with on some level. Our beliefs are more than a “worldview,” a phrase that makes it look like we look out through them like we look out the window. Some of our beliefs are central to our self-understanding. If we removed them, our lives would take a very different form than they do now. Our Christian faith is of this sort: it goes deep enough that it makes us “new creations.[[123]](#footnote-123)” Such a faith is more than ideas in our minds: it engenders fundamental commitments that guide us through the world.[[124]](#footnote-124) We don’t *have* a worldview as Christians. We have been made new, which means seeing everything differently, including ourselves.

Many of us are instinctively protective about our self-understandings. And understandably so. They are familiar to us. Many of us have grown up in them even if we haven’t done much to understand them. And they have served us reasonably well.[[125]](#footnote-125) The first time a question makes our core positions seem strange can be an uncomfortable and disorienting experience. Even if our livelihoods and pseudo-celebrity statuses aren’t at stake, our histories and purposes, our communities of friends, our ground level-commitments are. Defensiveness isn’t the right response, it is understandable.

Defensiveness isn’t confidence, even if it tries to sound like it. It’s a temperament grounded in the fear we might be wrong, rather than the “fear not” of the Gospel.[[126]](#footnote-126) It is a sign not of our belief’s vitality, but of its frailty. The impulse indicates we are not confident in the truth’s ability to stand and persuade on its own, without us coming up for reasons for it. But we are first and foremost witnesses to the truth, rather than its protectors. We point and point and point—it is the truth who draws all people unto himself.

Defensiveness is a way of asserting to another our own assurance. And it matters what sort of reasons we provide: if we lean too heavily on our own intellectual defenses, we risk marginalizing the proper grounds of our assurance in our self-understanding.

Our assurance is not rooted in our own knowledge and love of God, but in God’s knowledge and love of us.[[127]](#footnote-127) Paul prays that the Phillipians love would “abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment,” which suggests they have some of both. But three times he flips the formula on its head and points to God’s knowledge of us as the grounds for the Christian life. My favorite is Galatians 4:9, where he writes, “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God…” It’s almost as though Paul has caught himself and wants to get the order right. In 1 Corinthians 8:3, Paul does the same thing: “If anyone loves God, he is known by God.” And in one of the key passages that both points to our knowledge of God now and the perfection of that knowledge later, Paul writes: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, *even as I have been fully known.”* Our confession is one not of our own transcendent understanding, but of being comprehended by God and seeing things from within his grasp.

Our confidence in God’s knowledge of us—our assurance—takes as its source the love of God as demonstrated in history at the cross. In the person of Jesus, we are encountered by a God who shared every part of humanity including, by way of substitution, our sin. As we follow Jesus, we will learn that the cross provides cover for all our intellectual sins and errors, for those questions we ask badly and those we do not ask at all, bringing us to repentance for every intellectual misstep. The cross liberates our questions by instilling in us the courage to ask them. To modify what Augustine is rumored to have said, we are free within the confines of the cross to love God and ask what we want.

But we are also free from the defensiveness that so many of us feel in the face of hostile questioners. In the ultimate questioning scene in the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is placed on trial for being the Son of God. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus had engaged in questioning jujitsu with the religious leaders who opposed him. Their questions would come as traps and tests, and Jesus would counter with queries of his own. In Matthew 22, Jesus proves himself victorious at their questioning gamesmanship by answering one that the religious leaders cannot answer. The episode concludes with Matthew’s mildly chilling, mildly hilarious remark, “nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.”

But by the time we reach the trial, trickery has been replaced by naked hostility. Rather than engage the lawyers, Matthew repeatedly notes Jesus’ silence before them. His recurring response is, “You have said so,” which is all he tells Pilate before judgment is passed. He makes no long protestation or defense on his own behalf, offers no apologia for the rationality of his position.

Yet Jesus also demonstrates no fear: it is in the Garden beforehand when speaking with God that he makes known his desire that the cup of his suffering should pass him by. Making his fears and questions known to God gives him utter and serene confidence before men. The disciples are advised earlier in the Gospel that when they are dragged before “governors and kings…what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.” Apparently sometimes we shall be so confident that we will not need say much of anything at all.[[128]](#footnote-128)

Defensiveness, then, sometimes indicates a lack of confidence in God, not its presence. When we are safe and secure in the hands of Jesus, even those questions that are veiled attacks will neither trouble nor disturb us. And it will be ours to discern whether to respond or to stay silent. But we will also be freed to hear genuine inquiries as simply that: expressions of a desire to understand and make sense of whatever topic is at hand.

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What would we do if all the answers arrived, and all our questions went away overnight? For some of us, the prospect is more frightening than it might seem. Much of the energy in North American Christianity over the past decade has been motivated by the pervasive worries that the church is in decline and needs to be rescued. We have an industry of critique-making and solution selling. Various networks of books, blogs, and conferences are there to help Christians respond to the tide of secularism, rehabilitate the church’s teaching of the Gospel, take Christianity back from the religious right, or cure whatever the latest ailment happens to be.

As someone who has engaged in my own tiny version of that project, I sometimes wonder where we would be if things actually changed? What would I write about, if there wasn’t another problem to solve?[[129]](#footnote-129) Would I be okay if I had no audience because “my voice” became superfluous[[130]](#footnote-130)? Were all our efforts to come to fruition, would we be as overjoyed at the results as we are when our criticisms catch hold online?

It is possible to love our questions more than the answers. Questioning is invigorating, once you get used to it. There’s constantly something new to explore, some revelation to find out. The whole thing is downright thrilling. But it’s our love that marks us off as the people of God, not our questions. Not an amorphous, ambiguous love that makes us feel warm and fuzzy inside, but a love defined by the sharp edges of Jesus’s life and the creed. “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty” is the answer at the heart of the Christian’s confession, an answer that is the root of our being and the wellspring of all our intellectual energy.

If Christianity were a series of endless questions, it would amount to no more than Platonism. The answer liberates precisely by allowing for a rest from our questioning. The burden of finding out all is too heavy for us to carry, which is why most of us try to ignore it. But if we really turned it loose and questioned with no answers, we would someday run out. As the author of Ecclesiastes put it, “And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.”[[131]](#footnote-131) This is the same God who has “has put eternity into man’s heart, *yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”*

In the early church, the confession of the creed would take the form of a call and response. “What do you believe?” “We believe in one God.” The affirmation isn’t the end of questioning, but its renewal and liberation. There is still learning and exploration and inquiry. But our questioning is no longer under the impossible burden of justifying itself, for the one who seeks has been justified already.

The paradox is that the moment we reduce our lives to questioning and inquiry, we lose the reason for them. As long as our questions are going to be life-giving, we must not let them uproot us from the soil of Scripture and the community practices of the church.

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We do not speak often of the *vice* of curiosity anymore, but perhaps it is time for a retrieval. Of all the corrosions of the love of understanding, curiosity may be the most pervasive and subsequently the hardest to detect. As Paul Griffiths puts it,

Curiosity is concerned with novelty: curious people want to know what they do not yet know, ideally what no one yet knows. Studious people seek knowledge with the awareness that novelty is not what counts, and is indeed finally impossible because anything that can be known by any one of us is already known to God and has been given to us as unmerited gift. [[132]](#footnote-132)

Curiosity is a paradox, for if genuinely let loose it actually leads to questioning’s extinction. As Augustine puts it, “It is more accurate to say that [the curious] hate the unknown because they want everything to become known, and thus nothing to remain unknown.”[[133]](#footnote-133)

It’s not surprising that a loose, nearly nihilistic emphasis on God’s mysteriousness that borders on denying him any intelligibility to his creatures would arise in reaction to what is a fundamentally curious age. Ours is a world dominated by the cataloging of knowledge, by the searching out of the corners of the universe in order to find out its secrets. We have sent a rover to Mars, after all, and named it *Curiosity.* In such a context, the apophatic strand of theology seems like a counter-reaction (that is an overreaction) to the grasping and possessing of knowledge. The trick is to hold together the unknown with the knowing, the mystery with the revelation, the hidden with the gift.

Our curiosity has been fueled by the omnipresent, omnipotent internet. The restlessness to know what is happening elsewhere, regardless of whether anything in our respective world *actually* depends upon it, creates an information oriented community that slowly and imperceptibly erodes the patience and silence that studiousness thrives in. The pursuit of novelty is endless: memes are created, thrive, and die in hours. And its curators race to compile and promote amusing and trivial links and pictures, to temporarily sate the insatiable thirst to witness things we have never seen before (especially when kittens are involved).

The advent of social media has only compounded the problem. When our path into the vast landscape began at Google, our searching at least began moving in a direction. The links might soon take us afield, but as long as that was our doorway our pursuit would start with an end in mind. In social media, though, we are often confronted by a massive amount of information that we didn’t even knowwe cared about until we saw it—even if what we wanted was news from our family. Videos of cats doing cute things? Why, absolutely! The news *autotuned?* Sure, why not? The endless trivialities that the internet thrusts before us are like crack for the curious.

Curiosity stays on the surface of things. Because it wants only the unknown to become known, the moment that happens it is ready to move on. It is too restless to linger. *Trivial Pursuits* used to only be a diversionary board game. But curiosity keeps questioning captive to these pursuits, prompting it to move on the moment boredom or monotony sets in.

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It is not until the end of all things that we shall know fully. It is ours not to grasp at that knowledge, to claim it like the curious, but to wait patiently with the certain confidence that it will be given to us in due time. In T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets,* he writes:

I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope

For hope would be hope of the wrong thing.

Be still, and wait without love

For love would be love of the wrong thing.

There is yet faith, but the faith, the hope, and the love

Are all in the waiting.

“Ask and it shall be given,” is the promise. And all the promises of God are “yes and amen.” But there is no timeline for their fulfillment. When we put our questions to God, we are brought into the heart-wrenching waiting that purifies our souls.

Waiting for answers to our deepest questions isn’t easy. But if they are given, then they cannot be demanded. Like kids before Christmas, we can only look forward with the eager expectation that the unraveling and rejoicing will be even sweeter than we imagine.

Still, we feel the absences more deeply than we often let on. The Psalm that best captures it for me is 13, which I replicate in full so as to not minimize its force:

How long, oh Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul

And have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;

Light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

Lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”

Lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;

My heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord,

Because he has dealt bountifully to me.

What begins in a question ends in singing. But the time between is waiting and hope, waiting and expectation, waiting and pleading and prayer.

It is waiting that allows our questions to remain as question and keeps them from slowly morphing into demands. Waiting expectantly does not mean passivity; it means orienting our lives toward the promise of God and living within its domain. Waiting on God is one of the most pervasive themes in the Psalms and prophets. The most famous is probably from Isaiah 40:

Even youths shall faint and be weary,

and young men shall fall exhausted;

but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;

they shall mount up with wings like eagles;

they shall run and not be weary;

they shall walk and not faint.

One of my favorite examples is from Psalm 130:

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

O Lord, who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness,

that you may be feared.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than watchmen for the morning,

more than watchmen for the morning.

And that’s only the beginning.[[134]](#footnote-134)

The confident expectation that answers will be given sets inquiry free from the burden of finding them out. The end of our longing will come upon us, we might say, like a thief in the night—when we least anticipate it, from a place we do not expect. We have this hope as Christians—and in hope we are saved. *Longsuffering* is not simply the fruit given to those whose lives are sculpted by the Spirit: it is the virtue at the heart of the healthy questioning life. The more we let our minds linger over the unknowns, rejoicing in their outline while patiently longing for their revelation, the more our lives will reverberate with confidence in the promises of God. For answers to our deepest questions do not always reveal themselves with the speed or ease we might demand.

That is a slightly odd way of putting it, I realize, which deserves some unpacking. Consider *Tree of Life,* which is a plodding and mysterious film. Its dialectical narration and poetic imagery are nothing like the straightforward, plot-based movies that most of us enjoy. The film doesn’t quite *raise* questions—it more clubs us with them. The answers are (I think) all there, but they are left opaque. By the end, it’s almost as though filmmaker Terrence Malick has created a work that only those with ears to hear are able to understand.

I don’t have all the answers to my questions about *Tree of Life—*what *is* that attic about, anyway?—but I know that the only place I’ll be able to see the meaning is from within the work itself. The film is a whole—it has a beginning, a middle and an end, with layers of music and images and dialogue that all interrelate. When we wait for an answer, we take the whole into ourselves and sit with it, reflecting on its various components and seeing relationships emerge. We might catch a glimpse of the meaning—but then we are sent back into the process of reflecting and waiting and working through how the parts relate to the whole. The process takes us deeper into the work, and as we wait patiently and diligently consider, eventually more of the meaning will emerge before us[[135]](#footnote-135).

The internalization of a work like *Tree of Life* is a necessarily soul-expanding exercise. There are some films and books (and Scripture is unquestionably one!) that I simply don’t think my soul is yet large enough to contain—the questions they provoke are too large, too expansive. *The Brothers Karamazov* is like that for me, as is Charles Williams’ *Descent into Hell*. It is almost impossible for me to linger because I feel overwhelmed by their immensity. The incorporation of the whole and the attempt to grasp the meaning leaves me with glimpses, but nothing more. Moments of recognition come—“aha!”—and then fade, not because they are false but only because they are taken up into yet another layer. I find myself with such texts confronted by the frailty of my own vision: I see men walking about as trees, you might say, but lack the clarity to see the rest.

Likewise, there are some goods so immense and fundamental that to see them, to take them into ourselves, would require our own death. The tragic beauty of the cross, a God whose love and forgiveness covers a world where infants die of Alexander’s disease—the words cease at this moment. It is true, as John the Baptist said, that “I must decrease and he increase.” But the one who unites himself with Christ will find himself also hanged on a tree, for the baptism that demarcates our faith is a sharing in the death of Christ. Our union with Christ is a good that costs us nothing less than our lives. We have not felt even a fraction of its immensity.

But the soul expands slowly, inch by inch, as we incorporate the story of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection into our lives. It is that story that makes us, not the other way around: “For I have died, and my life is hidden in Christ with God.” To find our lives there, within that narrative, is to enter into our own death and follow in the steps of Jesus.

But that means also being set free from the burden of crafting the answers ourselves. At the end of all things, Christ is victorious and his people are vindicated. We do not yet see, but someday we shall know fully even as we are now fully known. That confident hope is born in us as we live within the entire story of Christ’s action, and purifies our questioning from the idolatry of holding to our answers simply because they are ours.

Questions inevitably introduce a gap between us and our beliefs. They make our intellectual homes unfamiliar to us, so that we become strangers to ourselves. The singular reality that God knows us better than we ourselves liberates such questioning. We are free to be strangers to ourselves precisely because God is intimate with us. None of that means our beliefs are wrong. But it reminds us that we do not possess the answer: it possesses us and makes us who we are.[[136]](#footnote-136)

All that the Lord sets free, he sets free to love. But love has bloody intentions: it will force us to carry our cross and deny our selves. And that is a process that extends even to the beliefs that form the backbone of our self-understanding. Such beliefs may be true, but not truthfully held. And it precisely down to such depths that God seeks structural integrity: “Thou desirest truth in my innermost being,” is David’s prayer. When we consider a question, we momentarily place our understanding on the altar of reality and wait for it to be burned up or given back, as Isaac was given back to Abraham.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Questioning is liberated when we do not ask it to do too much. Reality makes us and not we it. And at the heart of reality, out of the silence of unknowing, emerges the cross, which frees us from the anxious demand for an answer lest we sleep the sleep of death. The cross engenders within us the courage to explore without finding, to wait without an answer, to search without seeing—precisely because we know one has already gone before us into death, come back victorious from it, and will come again to consummate his triumph over sin. Our questioning is liberated, ultimately, by the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It is not in this country that we shall find the end of our exploring, but the country that has been prepared for us—a country that we shall arrive at and know in all the strange romantic familiarity of those who have arrived to a home that encompasses within it the universe.

**Chapter Seven: Communities of Inquiry**

I hadn’t been in college but three hours and my world was already smashed up. At the Torrey Honors Institute, freshmen are divided into cohorts that stay together over the course of four years. It was our preliminary session, a practice run, and we were thinking deep thoughts about the life of the Christian mind. Or so we pretended, anyway. Mostly as Freshman we were outdoing each other in claiming honor for ourselves.

At the end of our three hour session, the tutor who led the class offered us a few sagacious words meant to inspire and form us. One line stuck out: we would begin to have great discussions, he told us, when we learned to care about each others’ learning more than our own. It was a gentle yet firm chastening of the pretentious triumphalism of honors students.[[138]](#footnote-138)

Questioning often has an individualistic quality to it. It is *our* understanding, after all, that our questions are often aimed at. And many times they arise when we personally experience suffering or enter the purgative fires of solitude. We start from where we are, and more often than not our inquiries are indications of the selfish orientation of our hearts. But we cannot stay there. Such soil is too fallow and hard for real intellectual fruit to grow.

If it is the grasping of answers that our life depends upon (rather than the waiting to be answered in the final consummation of all things), then we will struggle to lay down our questions for the good of those around us. To do so would be death, only without the hope of the resurrection. The euphoria of an epiphany has an intoxicating quality to it that makes it feel so life-giving. And to lay it down to enter into someone else’s question, even if it doesn’t interest us, feels like drudgery and work.

To forestall our own questions for the sake of others does not mean our pursuits are unimportant. Were it so, it would not be a sacrifice. The laying aside of our own questions is hard precisely because we are setting aside our own good that another might have his.[[139]](#footnote-139)

But the only joy greater than our own understanding is seeing an epiphany register on the face of those we love and care about. When people who have toiled and worked, have struggled and fought, finally catch a glimpse of that which they have longed for—there is enough joy there to make us forget ourselves altogether.

Our questioning has a communal dimension. Questions orient us toward the world, but we often point and look along with others. They are often imperfect utterances by imperfect people, which enter into (sometimes disastrously!) imperfect environments. Which heightens our profound need for grace to shape our inquiries and pursuits.

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Communities that prematurely close down questions breed reactionary, narcissistic questioners. One generation’s intellectual attitudes shape those of the next, and usually in ways that are not consciously intended. If a community shows no interest in understanding the revelation that it purports to follow, then it is a community where faith appears in name only, not in substance. And its children will respond accordingly.

Which is why many of those who emerge from closed communities often want to ask questions, but have no sense of questioning well. We know there is something vital missing. But reactions can quickly become overreactions, like when a teetotaller first takes up drink. Or like Shakespeare’s monkish Angelo in *Measure for Measure,* whose repressed sexual desires run rampant after years of being dormant. When people are not taught to question well, the inevitable result is that they will question badly.

But when people first begin to ask “hard questions” we should welcome it as a sign of interest and vitality, not apostasy. We send our young people off to college presumably so they can become reflective, critical thinkers about the world around them. Yet ironically, that is just what many church communities have prevented out of their (appropriate) concern for good doctrine. The paradox is that in outsourcing their formation in colleges and universities, churches rob their young people of one of the very tools they need to think Christianly in their academic pursuits. Hence the anxieties behind so many college preparation ministries, which have gamely attempted to fill this gap.

Questioning well cannot simply be explained: within the Christian community, it must be modeled, integrated into the life of our saints so that those who are young, and young in the faith, can see what pursuing questions looks while seeking their transformation. If people are given little formation, then it is folly to expect much. If we do not like the fruit our communities produce, then we would do well to begin by re-examining the vines that nurtured them.

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“Teach me not,” T.S. Eliot writes in *The Four Quartets,* “of the wisdom of the past, but of their failures.” And so also their questions. The moment each new generation awakes and discovers themselves in a strange world, they face the temptation to believe that they have reached an undiscovered country. But a properly traditioned community is one that not only passes down the tenets of the faith, but the questions that accompany them. For when the questions have been forgotten, the tradition ossifies into a rigid, hardened legalism that everyone must accept even if no one can remember why.

Something like this goes on in Jesus’ day with respect to Sabbath observance. In Mark 2, Jesus’ disciples pick grain on the Sabbath, which the Pharisees viewed as breaking the commandment. Jesus goes beneath the Law itself, though, in his response: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” For all their observance, the Pharisees had forgotten the question to which “Remember the Sabbath day” was the answer.

Legalism is still in our midst, but the greater intellectual danger is from a more rampant reduction of the faith to the banality of cliches. “Let go and let God.” “God will work it out.” “It’s a God thing.” “Everything happens for a reason.” “It is what it is.” Such phrases may have meant something once, but disconnected from their context they become fragments of a forgotten way of life[[140]](#footnote-140).

Cliches stop thought prematurely, if anything does. They are a retreat from the burden of a question to the comfortable familiarity of an unquestioned platitude. And as such, they destroy any desire for understanding moment they are uttered.

One of my favorites is that we “shouldn’t put God in a box.” That may be, on one level, true. But what if God has put himself in a box, like a Scripture-shaped box? What then? Is the problem the box or the shape? I mean, if it was a circle-box that were infinitely large could God fit inside of it? What if we have to be able to say *this* and *not that* of something in order to know it? If God isn’t in a box, even a Jesus-shaped box, can we know him? Does God know his own box? Is God capable of describing his own box to his creatures? I think the cliche means something like “God is ineffable,” a beautiful (and forgotten) word that simply means “beyond speech.” Well, then. Does God have a language for his own ineffability? Can he teach it to us?

That is a barrage of questions, I realize, but they just come like a flood every time I hear say someone say not to “put God in a box.” (What if it is a very elegant box? Sorry. I’ll stop now.) I don’t know all the answers, but I do know that the cliche is short-circuits the process of finding them. Its reductionism is the soul-shrinking, mind-denying variety.

It is the nature of cliches, though, to avoid examination. That is how they end up being cliched, because they are uttered with the authority of “Everyone knows that…” regardless of whether anyone knows that at all. It is platitudinous precisely because we think it is beyond question. But one of the first steps in questioning well is recognizing what everyone takes as obvious often isn’t. When Jesus meets a lame man at the Pool of Bethesda, Jesus wonders whether he wants to be healed. It’s a funny question that most of us would never ask. *Of course* people who are lame want to be healed. But where we make assumptions, Jesus poses a question.

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Among the overreactions against community structures that inhibited healthy questioning are those have mused about replacing the church’s teaching practices, like sermons and Sunday School, with the back and forth of dialogues. Didacticism is out; dialectics are in. Rearrange the chairs in a circle and lets get started.

The retrieval of dialogue has been one of the most humorous ironies of the so-called “emerging church.”[[141]](#footnote-141) Dialogue isn’t a strategy unique to the philosopher Plato, but it certainly was perfected by him. Which is funny because the very people trumpeting it now have also been among the loudest decrying the “Platonic” influences on early Christianity—a practice that apparently provides cover for smuggling his method through the back door.

We need communities where dialogue happens, but within the right spot at the right time. We need places where the inquiry that proceeds by the back and forth of questioning and answering is buttressed by our submission to the authoritative pronouncement of the Gospel by qualified ministers and leaders. We should be methodological pluralists within our church communities, and value questioning for the gifts that it brings and the skills it engenders while confessing together our faith in the recitation of the creed. Our public proclamation that Christ is King can and must coexist with a communal disposition to inquire and consider the meaning of that Kingship.[[142]](#footnote-142)

The integration of questioning within the structures of the church, though, can only begin with leadership who are so committed to the truth of God’s revelation that they foster dialogues within their communities about it, and especially about their interpretations of it. A questioning community helps authorities avoid becoming authoritarian, for it reminds them even the infallible word of God must be questioned to be understood. And while their authority is real, it is derived from the truth—if their proclamation is true, then it will survive the Berean society inquiry potluck that ought to happen after. Such a willingness to foster questioning of our own work, to yield to others who ask us to “show our work” for our decisions, is that we will have more understanding for it and earn the sort of native respect of those who follow behind.

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Can our churches feel like home to those who don’t feel like they have one? There will always be some people who don’t understand the displacement that questioning can result in, the solitary trudging the wilderness that the intellectual journey can sometimes feel like. Faith is tricky because it the human condition of our salvation, open to all. But it is also one of the “spiritual gifts” given to the church. Within the body of Christ, some will be called to manifest their faith more deeply and clearly for the benefit and edification of others—and some may be so called to live out their questions in the same way. To each is given according to the measure of his faith. But we are one body, all working together for the glory of God in Christ.

Still, it can be hard for those whose questions morph into doubts to find room within the church. The hesitating moments of uncertainty—the first half of all those Psalms—rarely show up in the context of our worship liturgies. Many churches have taken it upon themselves to disciple us in joy. But they have not taught us the mourning, and when the moments where sin and brokenness come upon us we do not know how to respond.

But it’s also not easy for churches to know how to handle those who doubt. To sit with those whose souls are genuinely divided and not grow weary takes enormous patience.[[143]](#footnote-143) It is tempting for those who see to say, “Come. I will show you the way.” And sometimes, that is precisely what those who are struggling with their questions need. But we should remember the lesson from Jesus and the paraplegic: not all who are doubting want to let their dividedness go to enter into the confidence of faith. And others may strive and strive to enter the healing waters before Jesus comes and lifts them in.

What’s more, churches have articles of faith and moral codes that do establish boundaries for full membership in the community. We are a people who point to the Risen Lord and say *This one, He is God.* Such a witness means specification and distinction, difference and otherness, from those who do not share our confession. The uniqueness of such a community is presumed in the granting of authority to the disciples in Matthew 18:18, and is reaffirmed in its own way in 1 Corinthians 5:1-3. We proclaim one Lord, one faith, one baptism—which means dissension and rabblerousing are not abstract possibilities but genuine threats to the church’s authoritative witness to the life of Jesus.[[144]](#footnote-144) Acknowledging such boundaries does not shut down an “honest conversation” about them—another cliche that needs to go—but they do establish a frame for the conclusions people need to affirm to be full members of that particular community.

All that means is that the home the church provides for the homeless comes furnished. There’s a set of intellectual furniture to live with and use while wrestling with doubt and exploring our questions. The affirmation may be provisional—it may be tentative. It may be uttered with the cry “Help my unbelief.” But we should desire more from our churches than simply functioning as blank canvases wherein people of all types can gather and be left alone: as a community of love, centered on the revelation of Jesus, the church has an authoritative witness with a shape that graciously forms belief among those who are members of the community.

It is the church’s duty to remind questioners that it is not the negative spaces where our identity lies, but those places where we see the radiating glory of God. It is the church’s duty to proclaim the whole counsel of God, wherein we see the people of God wandering in the wilderness (because of their sin—a caution to all who feel like they have joined them) and cultivating their dependence upon God through the daily provision of his bread. It is the church’s identity as a community that prays to school us in that language, to teach us its cadences and its rhythms so that our questions form only one part of the symphony of speech.

Which is to say, the church welcomes those of us with fears and doubts without hesitation and without—question. But like the patient and gentle nurse to the moribund hospital patient, she also begins the slow and painful work of diagnosing our ailments and providing us relief.

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Those willing to question need an extra measure of courage and grace from the church. To disrupt the foundations of a community by raising a question about them is a task that should be undertaken reverently, soberly, and in the fear of God—and with the blessing, encouragement, and participation of the church’s leadership. To raise questions about the givens is to broach an area of a community that will feel taboo. It is to transgress boundaries, to tread on sacred space. And therein lies genuine danger for everyone involved.

But to doubt within a community is make ourselves vulnerable by allowing others to see the instability of our belief. Even where we are honestly and sincerely questioning, it is sometimes uncomfortable to candidly and freely confess our ignorance. And if our questioning is an instance of a divided mind, then so much the more dangerous. When there is the uncertainty about whether we will be welcomed or simply told to gin up the belief and carry on, then the need for courage is all the greater.

There is also wisdom, though, to keeping our questioning and struggling limited to a close circle of good friends and mentors. As they will know us best, the will also be able to help us discern when the questions we are asking are genuine, and when they are attempts to escape faithful obedience. The more familiar they are with us, the more they’ll be able to help us see the dynamics at work in the desires of our hearts and challenge us to pursue integrity appropriately.

What’s more, going public with our doubts risks more deeply attaching ourselves to them, particularly if they draw a crowd (as doubting seems to do these days). It can be hard to let go of those parts of ourselves, once we have become known for them. But the experience of doubt is one that we should *want* to move beyond, into a more stable and secure confidence in Jesus. But by making it a part of our public persona, we risk entering into it in such a way that we are more inclined to stay there.[[145]](#footnote-145)

But in addition to extending it, the church needs lots of grace from those who question and doubt. It is tempting to simply be frustrated at people’s ‘naive belief’ and their simplistic acceptance of authority, without recognizing that we believe all sorts of things on authority, and quite reasonably so. None of us have done the experiments demonstrating, for instance, that light acts simultaneously like a wave and particles. Yet broad minded, reasonable people that we are, we should be happy to accept it.

What’s more, it is easy for the experience of marginalization to sour into bitterness and recrimination. But those who have lively, questioning souls should have a great deal of empathy for those who are not. For I suspect we were not always as we are now, and if a life of inquiry is one step closer to flourishing, then the appropriate response to those who don’t have it is prayer and intercession.

Similarly, it is important for those of us who are questioning to remember that our exploration into the unknown is only one facet of our following in the way of Jesus. Questions, when they come upon us, have a way of skewing our perspective on the world. In severe cases, they can paralyze us from moving forward or making decisions. But when we continue in serving others, when we do not give up on prayer or worship, then the broader context of our lives with Christ can help keep our questions in their appropriate context—as important components of our pursuit of understanding, but by no means the totality. The moment our questions stand in the way of our loving and serving our neighbors is the moment we must lay them down.

Can the church be a place where we can ask our questions, and even a place where those afflicted by doubts can feel the welcome safety of a home? The church’s life is one constituted by faith working in love, of laying down our life for one another and bearing each others’ burdens. Sometimes, those burdens are physical. But other times, they are intellectual. A hard question about something that we care deeply about can weigh heavily upon us. And in such moments, it is the joy of those around us to help us carry that burden for us and stand in our stead, and it is our joy to yield from our demand to have our question answered and allow others to encourage us instead. For the church is a wounded but merry band, walking together arm in arm down the long road toward that final day when all the songs we sing now shall be swept up into the great chorus of Hallelujahs and Amens.

**Chapter Eight: Friendship, Disagreement, and our Fundamental Commitments**

“There are two kinds of people in this world,” my friend and Oxford professor remarked in the midst of a rollicking argument over the direction the church is hurtling down. He, more liberal than I and a devout Anglican, wanted the church to relinquish some of its historical positions (like on sexuality) in order to keep the tent as broad as possible. I sounded my disagreement, and plodded my way through the case. The conversation was spirited but respectful, as all such disagreements ought to be.

“And what kinds are those?” I took the bait. Anytime someone establishes a stark dichotomy like that, there’s an obligation to play along.

“Uniters and dividers,” he said. “And I am a uniter.”

There haven’t been many moments where I have had a decently witty comeback waiting on the tip of my tongue, but this was of the closest.

“Indeed. And I’m with Jesus and his sword, which turns son against father and brother against brother.” Point scored, he granted, and then we moved on.

Because I write about controversial issues, I often find myself in the company of individuals whose presence I thoroughly enjoy even when I disagree with their perspectives. Our conversations are similar to that with my professor: there are moments of agreement and disagreement and we are not bashful about trying to persuade each other of our positions. It’s not a happy-touchy-feely-let’s-just-get-along approach, or even an approach that is willing to rest content in the good of mutual understanding. We value the friendship not because of the disagreements, but because of the goods that we see emerge in the other through them.

Like my good friend Tyler Wigg Stevenson. Tyler is one of the most thoughtful people that I know. As the founder of the Two Futures Project, Tyler has spent a lot of time working to rid the world of nuclear weapons. Our disagreements on those questions and others are subtle but very real. But there is almost never a conversation with him that I walk away from without something new to ponder about the world. My respect for him is nearly boundless—which is why I do him the courtesy of disagreeing with him in the most vigorous way possible when necessary.

“Opposition is true friendship,” William Blake wrote, a phrase that C.S. Lewis would later use us in reference to his friend and sparring partner Owen Barfield. But it was G.K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw who may be the best twentieth century examples. The two had nearly diametrically opposed philosophies, were both enormously clever—and in Chesterton’s case, simply enormous—[[146]](#footnote-146)yet remained very good friends through a series of lively public debates that they held around England. In fact, when their debates ended their friendship waned. Though both expressed a desire to see more of each other, their paths no longer crossed.

Friendship can survive opposition and disagreement as long as there are other goods in common. Aristotle might have been overstating things when he noted that friends have all things in common, but he was right that there has to be *some* ground on which two people can meet as peers. And a question that two people pursue together—what *is* true about the world?—can provide its own sort of “common ground,” even if the answers each person proffers are fundamentally different.

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When my wife and I got married, I would sometimes joke that while other folks were “one flesh” people I was a twoness guy, myself. I am well acquainted with the Biblical language about the union and am all for it, properly understood. But I fought against having the unity candle at our wedding because the joining has to leave us intact as individual persons[[147]](#footnote-147). There’s always been something chilling to me about seeing both of those side candles extinguished, leaving only the solitary flame representing the now unified couple.

My wife and I have been arguing from the moment we met and we have no interest in slowing down now. Contrary to the stereotypes, I’m the one who runs on intuitions, as mine are pretty strong. My wife, on the other hand, may be the least intuitive person I know. She wants all the reasons laid out in proper order.[[148]](#footnote-148) And those differences in temperament and outlook make for very different ways of interacting with the world.

Yet they also make things interesting. While I am occasionally tempted toward frustration and to want my wife to think just like I do, they differences are a constant reminder that she is not me, which makes love possible. If every difference were to go, then love would go along with them. The Godhead is perfectly united as the Father, Son, and the Spirit—which is *the* mystery at the center of reality. As long as God remains himself in himself, he also remains distinct within himself—and so is love[[149]](#footnote-149).

Of course, my wife and I share fundamental commitments about the world. We both love Jesus and we want to love him better. Disagreement is a lot more difficult when people don’t have that in common. Like my friend John Corvino, who is someone that I respect a lot:[[150]](#footnote-150) he is a gay atheist apologist, which is just about at the other end of the “spectrum” of everything I believe. Yet he is also extremely bright, level-headed and fair. And fun to hang out with. His concern for others, his honesty, his commitment to discovering the truth make room for friendship despite the gaps between us.

To say that we are at other ends of the “spectrum” is a bit deceptive, though. While many of our fundamental commitments are very different, over time we’ve found that we have others in common. Change the “spectrum” and John and I would be on the same side of it. We both care about making good arguments, for instance, even when it means disagreeing with others who share our conclusions. We both care about speaking reasonably, and care about understanding those we disagree with. And we care that our conceptions of the world ultimately prove true.

Such common interests provide the context for a friendship, despite our significant opposition to each other’s intellectual positions. We both think we have the truth.[[151]](#footnote-151) But when we enter into the exchanging of reasons, we don’t presume understanding, but enter into a mutual giving of reasons.

As I mentioned in the last chapter, that searching and exploring creates a momentary gap between beliefs and the person. A person’s life may be shaped by how they see the world, but it cannot be reduced to it. The self-conscious process of digging up our commitments to explain and clarify them necessarily makes them momentarily *not* the same as our selves—else who or what is doing the explaining or clarifying? And that gap diminishes the likelihood that the disagreement will be viewed as an attack, as objecting to the argument will be subtly distinguished from critiquing the person.[[152]](#footnote-152)

We also don’t presume that there’s nothing more to learn from each other. Even though we think our perspectives are true, we don’t foreclose on the possibility we might have taken a wrong turn somewhere. And that means we occasionally come up against questions neither of us can answer. There’s more in the world than are dreamt of in our philosophies, and that means inquiring together as much as it does attempting to persuade each other. Our shared love of truth means that when we bump up against the unknown, a negative space, we both want to inquire into its nature and shape and see if we might see something we hadn’t before.

A posture of inquiry and exploration allows us to question *along with* others, even those whose commitments don’t match our own. Such a posture means not determining beforehand what we shall discover when we set out. We have our orthodoxies, which are going to shape what we both see. But the joy of inquiry is that we may just find ourselves surprised, either with more understanding of the world than we had before or with new beliefs that have replaced false ones. If we rule that out as a possibility, then our conversations will quickly become moribund and repetitive.

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How do we consider other people’s perspectives, fairly and honestly? Given how rarely it happens, it is more of a challenge than it might seem. We live in echo chambers, which repeat slogans and cliches while casting suspicions on claims that come forth from the “other side.” It’s polarization at its worst, where the disagreements run so deep that any conversation across community lines *besides* defending and critiquing is assumed to be betrayal.

We might hope that Christians would point toward a more excellent way of dialoguing, but we generally don’t. Throw in the added layer of sanctification, and every intellectual disagreement stands in danger of being reduced to a referendum on everyone’s holiness[[153]](#footnote-153). The church gathers around shared beliefs and the practices that sustain them. And anyone is welcome to watch, but certain practices of the church are appropriately limited to those who share her creed. But our adherence to authority is constantly threatening to devolve into an authoritarian closed-mindedness, which reduces all disagreement to dissension, rather than patiently abiding it out of the unshakable confidence that truth will prevail[[154]](#footnote-154).

It is true, of course, that some questions are simply attacks. But leaders who are not well practiced in the medium can struggle to tell the difference, and so tend to lump them all under the same anti-authoritarian[[155]](#footnote-155) banner. Yet questioning is subversive only in communities that don’t practice it well. When churches disciple people in their intellectual pursuits, the gap between healthy questioning and subversive questioning will be easier to discern. I have long wondered—and the question is unanswerable—if Adam and Eve had questioned themselves before the Serpent taught it to them, whether they might have been better prepared to see and reject the Serpent’s game. We should not underestimate the expulsive power of healthy questioning, in other words. For it is not whether we will inquire, but only when and how.

Yet how should we respond when disagreements go down to the “first things,” rather than staying in the realm of important incidentals? Whether the shape of the gospel, the meaning of a fetus, the nature of truth, differences on such core commitments often generate very different ways of thinking and acting in the world.[[156]](#footnote-156)

When such disagreement happens, providing reasons for our position proves difficult. Our foundational principles are often givens for us—we work outward from them, rather than the other way around. As a result, they often function as boundary markers, which give the community that holds them its distinctive character. Which is why controversy invariably lurks the moment they are questioned. When the foundations are shaken, people man the defenses.[[157]](#footnote-157)

And for good reason. Sometimes defense is precisely what is called for. As Chesterton pointed out, there are thoughts that stop thought—and they merit satire and a healthy dose of scorn. When the Gospel was threatened in Galatia, Paul responded with thunderous rebukes. When Jesus denounced opponents with “woes,” he humorously added the lawyers to his list after one of them piped up because he was offended (Luke 11:45-46).[[158]](#footnote-158) There’s lots of room within the Christian witness for sharp lines, sharp words, and sharp disagreements.

Yet there is a stark difference between Jesus and Paul and most of us today. Neither of them cloistered themselves within an echo chamber. Paul listened in and played along with the best philosophy of his day. Jesus offered his above pronouncements in the company of those at whom he aimed them, and was clearly willing to hear them out. Neither of them lived in the sort of closed communicative environments that we have today, where the only media we consume is that which we are already disposed to agree with. When Jesus warns his followers to beware the teaching of the Pharisees, he also exhorts them to “watch” it, not ignore it altogether.[[159]](#footnote-159)

Which is to say, such denouncements in our day primarily seem to have the effect of entertaining the faithful while driving away those we disagree with. We examine and test others out of our fervency for protecting the truth. But we’re not so eager to “Examine [ourselves], to see whether [we] are in the faith,” as Paul exhorts the Corinthians. Combine the lack of self-reflection with our own thin understanding, and what sound to us like thunderous denouncements uttered with the tongues of angels actually sound more like tinny dismals coming from clanging gongs.

In our discourse, Christians have taken as their stance first and foremost the preservation and defense of the truth. Which is, as I have already noted, a crucial component. But the truth is not the only good that governs Christian discourse. As a people who proclaim “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” the unity of the church is as much a witness to the world as her truthful proclamation. Such a unity is an article of faith, which means it is given. But like all such givens, it must be cultivated. In our speech, our love for unity ought to ensure that our speech aims for restoration, as Paul exhorts the Corinthians to pursue, even despite significant moral failures. While some may be, in our estimation, on their way “out the door,” the hope of reconciliation ought always chasten our speech.[[160]](#footnote-160)

One way to aim for restoration with those who are intellectually wandering is to set about questioning alongside them. And such a process may even mean opening our own central commitments. But the more confidence we have in our framework, the easier it will be to revisit it.[[161]](#footnote-161) Confidence, like all virtues, has its false and distorted approximations.  And one of its cheapest is a reactionary and hand-wringing defensiveness that passes itself off as rallying around the truth. To twist around a Teddy Roosevelt line, those who are most confident in their positions will be able to speak softly and question more patiently precisely because they have at their disposal a hefty intellectual stick—the truth.

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The ability to question alongside someone else is a form of “intellectual empathy.” When we have it, we imaginatively enter into how they are looking at the world. It goes beyond the “willing suspension of disbelief” toward the momentary granting of premises and notions that we might otherwise reject to see how their framework holds together—*if* the whole framework holds together—and to discern how to respond in light of that. Intellectual empathy is a form of seeing how.  As in, “Oh, I see how you could think that.  It’s wrong, but I can see how it might make sense.”  Or as in, “Oh, I see how you’re thinking there. That’s wrong and dangerous for the following seventeen reasons!” It is an act that is aimed first toward the good of understanding, a good that persuasion may flow from but can never precede.

Think about how we enjoy novels like *Lord of the Rings.* If we merely suspended judgment about the existence of hobbits, we might remain at a critical distance about the book but we wouldn’t much enjoy it. We cannot empathize with characters if we are reminding ourselves they do not exist. When we enter into a narrative, we imaginatively construct a world according to the rules the author presents. The more consistent and detailed the world is, the easier it is to believe. Which is why *Lord of the Rings* is one of the most successful novels ever: the depths to which Tolkien went to make up an integrated whole are without parallel.[[162]](#footnote-162)

Like all virtues, intellectual empathy needs sharp edges to be of much use.  In the same way that ‘compassion’ can be reduced to a slovenly affection that doesn’t actually think about what’s good for people, so too “mutual understanding” can be reduced to the goal of all our conversation, as though that is enough. But the opposite danger is to forgo understanding altogether, if the gap between two positions seems too wide, and to skip straight to the verbal fireworks that come with objecting and denouncing.

Of course, intellectual empathy doesn’t require giving up our own first principles, anymore than reading *Lord of the Rings* requires jettisoning Jesus. It is precisely because of our confidence in the strength of our first principles that we are able to enter into how others see the world, and have the freedom to explore along with them. The more sure we are where we are coming from, the more confident we will be in venturing out the door. And as Christians, given that God has already given us every square inch of the world before us, we can step out with the knowledge that all will be well.

I realize that having a posture of openness toward our “first principles” sounds dangerous. And it is. My argument isn’t that everyone should do it, but that a well-ordered, mature Christian mind (and movement) will be capable of it. We won’t always open up our first principles—but when those around us do, we can step within their framework and find reasons within for why our own commitments are more true and beautiful.

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I hated “showing my work.” I was reasonably good at math in school. I could run numbers in my head and would often see the answers quickly. But that wasn’t enough for my teachers: they wanted me to demonstrate my movement from question to answer, a process that I found tedious and redundant. I provided the right answer. Wasn’t that enough?

The problem, of course, is that beneath our “right answers” there is a chain of reasoning that explains how we arrived at them. We may not remember that reasoning, and we may not have ever consciously deliberated our way through it. But when someone comes along and asks us, “Why?” it’s that subterranean level which we set about excavating.

I’ve described the virtue of intellectual empathy above, but I might have used “hospitality” instead. When I seriously consider my friend Tim King’s views on poverty reduction, I open up my own mind and take into it views that, at first glance, I know I don’t agree with. But intellectual integrity means more than simply knowing the truth. It also means having the courage to entertain the alternatives placed before us by those whom we respect, and finding reasons why they fall short.[[163]](#footnote-163) The only real danger is that I’m going to be convinced by Tim or better understand him for it.

In the process of conversation, though, everyone has to show their work. We ask “why?” of each other, and then explain away. But sometimes, we find out in that process just how much we have in common. As Oliver O’Donovan has argued, beliefs are bound together:  the isolated propositions that we encounter are only fragments of an interdependent system, a system that must be explored for the proposition to be appropriately understood.[[164]](#footnote-164)  When we look at people’s beliefs that way, we “begin to accompany [our interlocutor] as [we] challenge him and question him,” discovering not only more clearly where our disagreement lies but also finding new and potentially surprising moments of concord.

But the work of understanding doesn’t replace persuasion. Setting out to convince others presumes that one person thinks they are right and the other wrong. That’s precisely the sort of line-drawing that makes people nervous. But the hesitation seems to be grounded more in fear than a genuine humility or respect for the other. If a friend told me they thought Jesus isn’t the Messiah, then after figuring out what they mean I’ll set out to persuade them otherwise. The division in thought only means the end of friendship where friendship is too weak to sustain it.

Persuasion isn’t an arrogant assertion of one’s views over the other’s: it can be an act of love. And that is the only reason to pursue it. What’s more, it is a task that *demands* genuine intellectual empathy. The most persuasive arguments are those which a given framework has no answer for. But those can only be discovered from within that framework—or as near to within as our imaginations will take us. When we listen and explore ways of seeing the world that are false, we will find questions or inconsistencies that the given framework has no explanation for. That is when the work of persuasion takes hold. It is not the goal of empathy, but it may be a byproduct of it.

There are other reasons, though, to pursue the virtue. The process of inquiring with others is one of the best ways to get beyond caricatures of views that we disagree with down to the substance. The common good isn’t solely determined by a discourse where people from various subgroups are working to understand and persuade each other, but that is *a* part of it. There can be no common good if there is no common ground. Especially if there is no interest in finding any. As Christians, we can play an important role helping people find that common ground by working to establish the mutual understanding that stands beneath healthy persuasion.

In that sense, friendships with people who disagree take on a civic dimension. Me and Tim, good for America. It’s a bit weird to think about a friendship on that broad of a scale (because even if it weren’t good for America I’d still enjoy his company). But it’s true: friendships despite disagreement point toward a world where differences don’t end in total fragmentation. These sorts of friendships of persuasion are one way we can play nicely as American citizens without compromising our Christian faith[[165]](#footnote-165).

One final reason for the virtue, in case I’ve not been thorough enough. When we submit our first principles to a question,[[166]](#footnote-166) we are forced to find innovative and interesting ways within other people’s frameworks to make the case for our beliefs.  As Robert Spaemann has written “Even ‘axiomatic beliefs’ need justifying in the long run if they face a challenge.”  When people question Christianity’s views on sexuality, for instance, we can retreat to the principle that “the Bible says so.”[[167]](#footnote-167) And the Bible *does* say so, if by “so” we mean that sex outside of marriage is wrong.[[168]](#footnote-168)

But there is *more* to be said than that the Bible is against it. The more we live within the logic of Scripture, the more resources we will have to explain its internal reasons in ways that make them more plausible to others—even if they aren’t persuaded. Entering into such an imaginative process to explain our first principles might require finding new justifications for those beliefs. But that would also help us find new, fresh arguments and rhetoric to explain “the same old thing.” And it helps remind everyone *why* we held those commitments in the first place, which in a decadent community has usually been forgotten. As an exercise, it brings about nothing but good.

When our fundamental commitments become controversial that is our opportunity to explore *why* they have been given and move to the deeper logic beneath them—rather than simply shouting them louder while dismissing our neighbors as lost and incapable of moral reasoning. It is an opportunity to demonstrate our intellectual long-suffering, to patiently and ploddingly continue pointing to the goods inherent within our position while unpacking them in language others connect with as meaningfully as we can.

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It is unfortunate there aren’t many public spaces where such dialogue happens and conflicting understandings of the world meet together among sympathetic minds. The internet’s promise was that it would create an open public square for anyone to speak up. The actual result was that so many voices arose that balkanization occurred: everyone hung out with their “tribes” or “teams” and only talked amongst themselves. And understanding requires entering into how a person sees the world, which takes more than reading an isolated blog post or tweet. It is not surprising our culture struggles to cultivate intellectual empathy; our attention spans no longer support it.

But if I’m right and friendships rooted in inquiry serve a public good, then we need more spaces for such friendships to emerge.

One such model is run by the church I called home in St. Louis for several years, The Journey. Midrash, a ministry of theirs, hosts public discussions on controversial subjects in a local brewery. The monthly conversations have ranged from marriage to fashion to local education to euthanasia to food politics. No subject is off limits. And while the occasional crank shows up, the 100 or so rotating guests almost always provide spirited, interesting conversations from which genuine friendships sometimes emerge, and during which genuine understanding can be won. Midrash’s provides the space and the structure: the substance of the conversation is determined by the people who show up.[[169]](#footnote-169)

Whether they have had much of an effect on St. Louis’ broader civic discussion is an open question. But there few similar spaces where diverse views are presented on a regular basis and where people can come hear perspectives that they disagree with presented in a reasonable way. If all they are able to do is destroy caricatures by introducing people from various viewpoints to others that they disagree with, isn’t that a good worth pursuing in itself?

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Opposition isn’t always a problem. Many times, it can be a fertile source of intellectual and creative energy. Augustine and Athanasius wrote reams of content trying to disabuse the church of the heresies that had infiltrated it. Aquinas, Calvin, and Luther—all similarly giants—didn’t exactly shy away from a debate. Dante wrote beautiful poetry tossing his enemies into hell, while Solzhenitsyn wrote literature to end communism. My own intellectual hero, Chesterton, wrote a book called *Heretics*. A healthy dose of opposition clarifies, helping us see what is at stake on an issue.[[170]](#footnote-170)

When we question ourselves, we generate internal opposition to our own positions. In making our beliefs suspect to ourselves, we start off on a journey of (re)discovering the reasons we held them to begin with. That process is at the heart of intellectual creativity, for we are forced to mine the subject at levels deeper than we had already known. The questions create a pressure from which there must be a release, a release that comes when we find the deepened understanding we were searching for.

The more we have questioned ourselves, the more equipped we will be to hear others’ questions. And the more we have lived a life of questioning, the readier we will be to mull over the viewpoints of those who we meet and to give them an honest shake. If we have grown ourselves comfortable with the momentary feeling of disorientation that facing up to an unknown can create, then we won’t have anything to fear in our conversations—including saying that we don’t know.

Understanding is a good that transcends creeds. And as Christians, it is the sort of good which we should pursue for others, as it is a good we want for ourselves. It’s frustrating to have your position misunderstood, as everything that follows invariably misses the mark. To understand a position does not entail that we agree with it: but in a world marked by unsympathetic, hasty dismissals and cataclysmic, thunderous prognostications of doom, a strong dose of listening and considering might go a long way toward improving our discourse, both inside and outside the church.[[171]](#footnote-171)

Regardless of whether our friends are Christians or not, whether they agree with our political stances or can’t stand them, there will always be points of intellectual disagreement and opposition that emerge. Some of those will be substantial: others will be relatively minor. But each time that happens is an opportunity for the friendship to be deepened, for each person’s commitment to the truth to be reinforced, and for love of the truth to take root just a little more deeply in our hearts.

All that said, allow me to repeat a caution: we will be tempted to attach ourselves more to the disagreements that we have, and our desire to appear “reasonable” in the face of them, than the truthful answers that we have that obligate us to move beyond understanding toward persuasion. My hope is that on fundamental questions, disagreements ultimately go away—because either one or both of us has learned that we were wrong and has changed our stance because of it. But when such intellectual conversions happen, the goods that allowed us to disagree well and the friendships they engendered will all endure.

**Chapter Nine: How to Ask a Good Question(?)**

“There are no stupid questions.” That’s the cliche that sanctifies every effort, that makes space for even the most timid to put our questions to the world. It was also ruined for me at a young age by an old ESPN commercial. They were selling their college football show by having one of the hosts teach as a professor. When someone asked a question, he responded with a voice that wavered between the patronizing and encouraging, “Son, there are no stupid questions. Only stupid people who ask questions.”

What does it take to ask a question? Or maybe that’s not the best way of putting it. “What does it take” seems like a weasel phrase. “Its” don’t question, after all. People do. Maybe this instead: How do we ask a question? Better, but still ambiguous. Perhaps this: What moves a man to inquire about the world, to unfurl his question mark as a banner against the heavens?

The commercial may be funny, but it’s also completely wrong. It is the wise who have the courage to ask so-called “stupid questions.” Most of the time, it’s the obvious questions that prove the most difficult to answer. “Why does something fall to the ground?” It took a long time for someone to figure out the math behind gravity. What are we made of? Where do our dreams come from? What is justice? Socrates didn’t become the wisest man in Athens by demonstrating his knowledge, but by being willing to ask questions even at great personal cost. Those who love understanding pursue it, even if it means sounding “stupid.” When I was a teacher, I tried to inculcate that message into my students, with varying degrees of success. But only the proud never have a question on their lips.

There are *bad* questions, though. We start from where we are, but we don’t necessarily stay there. In my classes I didn’t care at the outset whether the students’ questions were any good: I simply wanted them to be so engaged that they ask questions of their own. My concerns about quality came later, as they learned to recognize when they had asked a doozy and when they…hadn’t. As they became more experienced with the format, we would occasionally reflect about what made some questions better than others and even decide together which questions they wanted to pursue.

It’s intimidating to ask a question, especially in a classroom environment where grades and reputations are at stake. The comparison that goes on, the competing for approval, the boasting and backbiting—they all erode the freedom questioning needs to flourish.[[172]](#footnote-172) Still, the courage to question wouldn’t be worth very much if all questions were created equal. There is no intrinsic virtue in merely acting against outside our community. A thief and an honest man may both be rebels. But their virtue stems not from whether they are dissenters, but whether they do the thing well or badly. The value of questioning isn’t in the practice *per se,* but in slowly and deliberately learning to question well.

Being able to tell the difference between a good and bad question is a bit like telling the difference between good and bad music. And yes, there is a difference: people spend years studying music, presumably for more than the right to shout their tastes louder than everyone else. We don’t simply value Mendelsohn’s Brandenburg Concerti because they happen to be old. We recognize that it is an excellent representative of its form. Were I to record my meager efforts on the piano, we wouldn’t ignore them simply because I was the one banging them out:[[173]](#footnote-173) they would rightly fall to the dustbin of history because they would be *no good*.

There is a similar sort of practiced skill to questioning. Lawyers and investigators learn how to become excellent questioners because they need to elicit unique information. Every doctor starts his diagnosis with an inquiry. Reporters go to school to learn the skill because their livelihood depends upon it. Teachers take classes in how to ask questions well, and are starting to take classes in how to help their students question well.[[174]](#footnote-174) The practice may be more art than science, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t anything to learn.

As we grow in our discernment of questions, we start to hear the shades and subtleties at work in the form. When someone asks a question that goes to the heart of the matter, and asks it sincerely, it *sounds* different. It will cut through a discussion with the clarity of a bell. Discussions can sometimes feel a little chaotic: everyone is offering their opinion, sometimes people are talking past each other, and no one seems quite sure where the whole thing is headed. But when a good question is voiced, the transformation in the room is physically palpable. Everyone leans in and focuses a little more.[[175]](#footnote-175) It’s almost like hounds who have caught the scent. We wait and search, and wait and search, but when the trail is found—away we go.

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Questions arise when we sit with the world around us. If we are not attentive to all that is transpiring, then we will not notice the negative spaces in our understanding—until we are forced into it by pain or suffering, that is. It’s tempting to want to jump to a deep question right away, but sometimes such questions take a lot of time for them to emerge.

As a student in the Torrey Honors Institute, we would spend three hours at a time discussing great books. Some students found long chunks of the discussion boring, and occasionally I did as well. But by my sophomore year, I began to spend classtime thinking not only about the text, but about the interpersonal dynamics at work around me and the direction of the discussion itself. It was no secret that some classes were more interesting than others. I wanted to know *why*. So after each session,I would ask myself whether class was successful and what I might have done to make it more fruitful.

I eventually noticed that the truly great class sessions had a student who advanced a compelling thesis that tied together the whole book—which was instantly transformed into a question about whether their interpretation was right—or we landed on a puzzle that we wanted to solve but couldn’t. In both cases, we grappled with the meaning of the whole text in light of specific passages—and then vice versa. As we went back and forth between parts and the whole, our questions got better and we grasped more of the realities that the text did—and didn’t—point to.

Once that lightbulb went off, I started spending my class sessions deliberately doing three things simultaneously: (a) reflecting on our professor’s opening question and on as many of the comments by students as I could remember, (b) scanning the text furiously looking for pertinent passages that I had noted during my reading, and (c) attempting to keep before my mind’s eye the text in its entirety. I even had a (terrible) name for it: the “whole discussion, specific passage, whole text” principle. And abiding by it was really hard work.

My goal in each discussion was simple: to let the conversation unfold and then at some point to either advance the thesis or find the puzzle. I actually got so good at it that I realized I was bordering on the manipulative. I remember one class where it occurred to me that if I advanced my question it would send us down a very different direction than we had headed. But my question was a real one. It arose after I listened and reflected for an hour and a half.[[176]](#footnote-176) I knew that if anyone asked me about it, I could give reasons for the question*.* I had enough evidence to show why a deeper understanding meant heading off in that direction, even if I couldn’t see the answer directly. So I went for it, and everyone else followed.

At that point, I returned to my posture of listening, reflecting, asking clarifying questions of others, while trying to find the next layer down. I knew that by sitting with the text longer I might come up with a better question yet, a question that would take us one step further into the heart of things.

Good questions emerge slowly. It takes time for the whole to unfold for us. We do not have it at the outset. Especially in conversations with others: it takes time while talking together for everyone to see what an individual might. I included the “whole conversation” in my maxim because I wanted us all to go deeper, for my good and everyone else’s, and that could only happen by carefully attending to the conversation. I tried to be so aware, in fact, that at any moment I could repeat verbatim what the previous person had said. Not to posture, as no one asked me, but because attentiveness to others is a good on its own.

It’s easy to see how all this happens in a classroom, where there is a defined space of time to reflect with an intentional community about a defined issue or text. Outside of class, the process is much more difficult. We only have a part of our lives—we know not our end, which means the “whole” for us (and hence the meaning) is not yet complete. And the key moments may not be clear to us until much later.

But we are given a whole that we read the parts of our lives through in order to make sense of them. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again—interpreting the fragments before us requires integrating them into that narrative, to see how the meaning of Christ’s life shapes and determines the meaning of our own. We can live with the partiality of our lives, precisely because we have the fullness of God’s. Our deepest, most pressing questions come from this collision of the fragmentary moments of suffering and sin before us with the whole of God’s action in the world. As we explore our experience in light of the Scriptures, we are driven back to the Scriptures with new questions to find out. And in that exile and return, we will see our questioning and understanding of both God and his world go to depths we never thought possible.

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Sometimes I think that the difference between a good question and a bad one is simply timing. “How are you?” is a perfectly fine inquiry upon meeting someone: it’s pleasant and open-ended and allows the other person to respond as they will. It contains an invitation into a conversation, but a non-threatening one. It gives the person maximum flexibility on how they want to answer[[177]](#footnote-177).

And asking “How are you?” of a friend who is suffering is fitting as well. The inflection will be a little different—a little more care, a little more deliberation. Accent on the “are,” as it were. The question indicates concern for his well-being, but leaves it open for him to respond as he wants. A more specific, directed question might not feel quite as safe.

But stick that question in the middle of a conversation about politics and patriotism and it would clearly be off kilter.[[178]](#footnote-178) But I’ve seen even more egregious examples happen. Folks sometimes have a “tin ear” for conversation, as it were, dropping the inquiry into the wrong spot with the wrong inflection. We would occasionally joke about the person whose questions started at 1-10 on the intimacy scale, even with people they’ve just met. “Tell me about your history” is a fine question for a pastor to say in their study. But I watched a friend who was asked sincerely asked it once in the middle of a get-to-know-you party.[[179]](#footnote-179)

My wife likes to occasionally remind me of one of our first sessions together as freshmen. In the middle of a conversation about The Iliad, I protested, somewhat loudly and dramatically, “But what *is* beauty[[180]](#footnote-180)?” I, having no recollection of this event, unfortunately have no reason to doubt my wife’s.[[181]](#footnote-181) My only consolation is that I’m sure it wasn’t the worst question I asked during our classes together, only she’s forgotten all the others.

“What is beauty?” is a fine question to ask. In fact, it’s one of the fundamental questions, a “hard question” that deserves our attention at some point. But approaching “hard questions” too quickly can be a sign of pseudo-intellectual pretentiousness, not intellectual maturity. It’s one of those questions that “deep” thinkers are supposed to ask. But for young minds like mine (was?), it’s enough to think about Homer’s conception of friendship in Patroclus and Achilles. “What is beauty?” isn’t a question that comes up, at least not without a lot of jimmyrigging and artificial reading. More disciplined minds will hew closer to the questions embedded in the texts and contexts before them.

Running to a few key questions happens a lot among those who are still getting their intellectual sea legs under them. It’s no sleight to Calvinists and Arminians to point out that there are other questions theology pursues. Yet some students tend to reduce every line of inquiry to that one. Otherwise interesting discussions on the Incarnation will careen into the intractable arguments over the meaning of election. There is a time and place for thinking through that relationship: but that time and place is often later and somewhere else.[[182]](#footnote-182)

Which is to say, one of the marks of excellent questioning is the ability to pursue a line of inquiry while resisting the impulse to wander every which way on a whim. Ironically, the lack of discipline almost invariably leads us back into those conversations which are habitual for us. We end up repeating the same conversations, over and over, because every time we set out we can’t resist the comfortable temptation of the familiar. Excellent questioners, though, keep things in their place and time; they notice the path that leads from the nature of God’s goodness to a dispute over what Paul means by “predestined” without necessarily taking it. The threads that we *do not* pick up and follow are just as significant as those that we do.

I should highlight one more bit to all this, which has been present already but buried: excellent questions fit the thing questioned as much as they fit the moment. Over the past few years, I’ve taken to opening conversations with some of my younger married friends with a knowing, “Well, you’re still married?” It’s a gently worded, slightly facetious inquiry that is meant to bring a smile while opening up a conversation about how their marriage is doing. I’ve had people respond with everything from, “Yes, and loving it!” to “Yes, barely.” It’s also the sort of question that fits the person. I wouldn’t ask it if we weren’t friends and I didn’t know it would be well-received. It’s a starter question, and so deliberately broad. But more I know about the person, the faster the questions hone in on the details and the more interesting the conversation gets.

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This is the point where I am supposed to get very practical about how to ask good questions and how not to. What would all this *mean,* after all, without a few clear, specific applications? How then shall we live? If ever there was a question to which Christians these days want a specific answer, it is that one.

Yet I am reluctant to provide such guidance. I worry that the emphasis on “practical application” keeps us perpetually immature.[[183]](#footnote-183) The Word proclaimed cannot be reduced to principles. It creates a way of seeing the world that we enter into and look through. It is not “applied.” It is lived within. And the more we live within the language of the Word, the more we find ourselves questioning the world well. In the same way that our dependency on study guides has undermined our ability to be communities of healthy questioning, our reliance on application from the pulpit undermines our deliberation.

The moral teachings of Jesus are frustratingly vague: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself” gives us something to work with. But it barely specifies how we should then live. The command to the rich young ruler to “Go, sell all that you have,” is in part so shocking because the bluntness is so rare. It is not often in the Scriptures that Jesus tells someone directly what he must do.

How shall we ensure our questions are shaped by the “more excellent way” of love? By entering into the world that the question gets on to within the community of the church. And by sitting together and embedding ourselves in the Word and embedding the Word into us. And by being willing to read, and then read again—until the Word forms itself in our mind and the negative spaces emerge before us. And by setting aside our own life for those of others. And by placing ourselves in the world and hearing how strangely we see it, even as we point to the unknown God who has become known.

By inhabiting a new way of seeing the world, we displace our questions with new ones. The moment we make our questioning suspect by bringing it under the domain of God’s severe mercy, weopen ourselves to the need for reformation by the empowering presence of the Spirit of God. “Where are you?” is the question of God that precedes the repentance of Adam. In attempting to answer where are, and where our questioning is taking us, we begin the long process of returning to our home. The beginning of questioning well is—seek questioning well.

It’s true that not having more specific “how tos” can be frustrating. When I wrote my first book, many people wanted me to come out and answer precisely whether I thought tattoos are permissible. That was the first and only question they cared about. But I wanted to think long and hard about a different question, namely, why are tattoos popular today? Why is getting a tattoo even something that we consider? I wanted to pull up the subterranean ideas, as it were, to see the fundamental presuppositions beneath people’s questions. And here, too, it is worth deliberating in the same way: What does it say about us that we are so eager to have the practical questions answered and so uninterested in exploring the world that they come out of?

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Questioning well demands, perhaps more than any other virtues, those of patience and persistence. It is not always obvious what we are missing, though as we grow older and learn more we slowly realize how little we actually understand. But the process of deliberating and inquiring, of searching out and seeking, works against hastiness—but won’t delay answers forever. Nor does understanding come without a cost. As Christians, we think the truth of God’s revelation cost everything, for it came about through the death of the one in whom all things are contained.

Which is to say, be prepared to travel slowly. And do not be discouraged if you feel like you do not go at all, especially when inquiring with those who do not share your commitments. There’s a sort of Christian triumphalism that expects people’s outlooks to fall apart at any minute, and in the midst of tragedy and crisis the cracks sometimes widen into cleavages. But many people mostly get along okay. And even when intellectual crises happen, they are often able to patch things up well enough to keep things running smoothly enough. Intellectual conversions often happen slowly, if they happen at all.

But even if “smoothly enough” provides a lifetime of stability, as Christians we don’t think a lifetime is enough. Non-Christians may decide it is. And they shall have their reward in full. But we ask our questions not just beneath the shadow of death, but beneath the reality of a life that is eternal. If the intellectual gears are gummed up, serious erosion will occur. Which means that if anyone has an *obligation* to continue questioning and inquiring, to seek intellectual repentance and sanctification, it’s those who affirm the teachings of Jesus.

**Chapter 10: The End of our Exploring**

“But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” It’s so easy to overlook, that passive voice. It’s neatly tucked away in plain sight, hidden on the surface. Their eyes were kept from recognizing him *by whom*? And why on earth, or in heaven, would two disciples be prevented from seeing the Risen Lord?

The passage is an enigma, which makes it a favorite a staple in books of this sort. You might say it comes to us in a questionable shape. It’s the sort of passage that evokes wonder and just a little confusion. The resurrected Jesus appears to two disciples who are locked in conversation about the events surrounding his passion as they travel the seven mile journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus. He enters into their conversation, allowing them to recount to him the events of his life. But his response is chastisement: “Oh foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Jesus answers his own question by conducting a comprehensive Old Testament study, interpreting “in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”

But why veil their eyes, so that they cannot recognize him? The problem gets worse, as after his lesson he pretends he’s going to leave. They have to plead and protest with him to stay longer. They eat together, sharing a communion meal, and their eyes are finally opened to see their Savior. It is in the breaking of the bread, the sharing of life, that the satisfaction of the desires is given.

For these disciples, a truthful interpretation of the Scriptures isn’t sufficient. Having the right answer is necessary, but not enough. Even the teaching of Jesus points forward to the final disclosure, the consummation of knowledge. The biblical lesson both intensifies their desire and prepares them for the revelation. But there is a communion that goes beyond it, a communion our faithful interpretation prepares us for, which is a peace that transcends all understanding.

Jesus is willing to hide himself that he may be known. His truthful interpretation is preparation: he gives them a truthful outline so that they would see in full. He renders himself not-known that they would long for him to be known. He hides himself in their conversation so he might reveal himself in communion.

The passage is provocative not only for what it says, but what it does not say. What’s there raises enough questions. But what about what isn’t? Luke leaves hidden just how all those Old Testament passages refer to Jesus, though he almost certainly must have heard that sermon repeated. The one definitive, and from the mouth of Jesus himself—yet Luke leaves it aside. It is almost as though he is unwilling to short-circuit the process for us, that he wishes to intensify our desire to understand and know by leaving in the shadows what will someday, finally and permanently, come to light.

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I have sat in empty streets and watched by lamplight while others retreat to their beds. I have felt the pangs of sorrow, the tragic joys of an inarticulate, inexpressible beauty. I have sat listening, quietly, to the thoughtless chatter of the television and wondered whether I am any different. I have felt the oddness of a church pew, have tripped and stumbled even while walking forward to break bread in gratitude. I have wondered about the little church down the street, and whether it too will be boarded up someday. I have struggled, patiently and impatiently, to find the question my thought is an answer to. I have longed for the newness, the remaking, and have wondered why he tarries. I have trembled at the gravity of writing down words. Will I too join him on the last day? I know the cold of a night beneath the terror of eternity.

When we are face to face with God, shall we dare ask a question? When we remember the suffering of the infants, the brutality of a violent world, how can we pause to reflect, to have a thought at all? Shall we tarry here, and linger over one last cup of tea? Is it vain to believe our words have found a meaning, or that a meaning has found our words? Shall we speak at all, or shall we sit in the silence, measuring out our lives according to the subtle smiles we pass each other across our open books? Is it because of all that quietness that libraries are such romantic places, or is it that we feel ourselves to be surrounded by all the mysteries of the universe?

It is a long journey, this road home. There are detours and wrong turns, mistakes and sins. There is repenting and repenting, and a mercy that stands with, in, and around us. And then always more repenting. And there is growth, the only law of the life of the Spirit. It is not always perceptible, for the seeds beneath the earth are reborn long before we see their shoots. But there is still the expansion, the stretching outward and upward to the heavens. We grow into vision. But we are not given it yet. We have heard the echo, but we have not grasped its source. We have seen the reflection, but haven’t been given the consummation.

When shall I come and appear before my God?

Questioning is one form our longing takes. We search out the earth for satisfaction, driven to roam like Odysseus longing for his home. We talk together, wondering on the path toward Emmaus. It is a journey of a thousand sorrows, but also of a thousand thousand joys. And sometimes the joys and the sorrows come together, and are found within each other, in a collision like a cross that sends our wonder soaring to new heights.

Yet we question beneath a shadow that our eyes are too weak to penetrate, which seems like the shadow of death but has become in the resurrection the shadow of incomprehensible life. It is not because he is a conjuror playing the hoax that Jesus vanishes from his disciples. They are not ready for the permanence, not large enough to see the expansiveness of his beauty. “No eye has seen,” Paul says, “and no ear has heard.” But Shakespeare’s translation is better, for it comes in the stammering of someone who has had a foretaste: “No eye has ever heard, no ear has ever seen, no hand has tasted, nor tongue felt or heart described what my dream was like.”

I sometimes wonder whether we use the questions to forestall the answers, to procrastinate and delay. The answer comes with the trumpet blast of judgment. It is a pronouncement, the defining between *this* and *that.* It closes things off, giving us only the choice to live within reality or construct one of our own. To be answered, to have our questions resolved, renders us accountable for all that we have sought out. The finality of an answer provides closure, an ending, allows the curtains to fall.

Yet the vision we are given is a person, who goes beyond the answer even while including it in himself. It is not a a framework, an understanding that shall make us whole, but a *who.* The authorized witness points to the person, the person back to the words that he makes life. Like those disciples, we stand in danger of resting at the one while missing the other. But the final question we will be asked is not what account we are able to provide, but what person we are able to plead to.

Until then, “We shall not cease from exploration,” as T.S. Eliot has written. We have the depths to search out, the hidden spaces to delight in. Eliot goes on, in the passage from which the title of this book comes:

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Through the unknown, remembered gate

When the last of earth left to discover

Is that which was the beginning;

At the source of the longest river

The voice of the hidden waterfall

And the children in the apple-tree

Not known, because not looked for

But heard, half heard, in the stillness

Between the two waves of the sea.

Quick now, here, now, always--

A condition of complete simplicity

(Costing not less than everything)

And all shall be well and

All manner of things shall be well

When the tongues of flame are in-folded

Into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and the rose are one.

To arrive where we started. To return to our home, only to find it new, deeper and more perfect. To see anew goods that we had buried and forgotten in the dimness of our vision. The setting sun on the limestone, the fog fading into the frost on a winter day, the tender smiles between the elderly couple across the table—to be awake to see the world’s resplendent goodness, a resplendent beauty that will somehow overwhelm all the horrors of the night. To encounter the face of an other, containing within it the mysteries of a soul that reflects the life of God. To see in the breaking of the bread the vision of the Risen Lord. “And we beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of God.” God comes as a stranger into his own home, that we might again have a home with him.

The end of our exploring and our path are one and the same. “For to me, to live is Christ.” But to die, that too is Christ. We ask our questions beneath that sentence, a sentence that seems like death but is really abundance. The reason for our desire is its consummation. And the joy goes ever onward, always forward. The defining passage of St. Paul’s life and ministry is not found in the argument of Romans or the majestic panoramas of Ephesians, but in the intimate, heartfelt letter to the Phillipians: “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” The prize is not stasis, but a movement toward the infinite center, the depths of the goodness of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And then a movement outward, into and toward the world which radiates with his glory, to take our place among the chorus of creatures endlessly singing the praises of his glory. But always the infinite explosion of abundant goodness because of our union with Christ.

For the answer we are given is the life of a person, the Lord of all, and life abundantly. Shall I say this again? As we sit across the table wondering, “How can these things be?” we are interrupted by the intimate laughter of a joke that has been retold one time too many, by the chair that always breaks on the unsuspecting guest, of the warmth of a fire and candles and a conversation that’s lasted well beyond midnight. “But now I call you friends,” he tells us. And we shall be friends indeed.

But for now, there is the plodding, the questioning and the prayer, the serving and the sacrifice, living within the friendship while we look for the King’s return. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” And in this space between the advents, we find ourselves searching out the “all things” we are given in Christ while slowly learning to see as he does. Foreigners in a strange land, longing to be taken home—yes. But simultaneously strangers encountering our own home, seeing it under the ruin of sin and praying for its renewal.

All this is the life of faith. It is hope that will mark our witness, the confidence that beneath the felt absence of God from our lives the promise of his presence is unquestionably true. Abraham grew strong in faith, despite the age of his own body and the frailty of Sarah’s flesh, that God would bring forth the seed who would be a blessing to the nations. Such longing confidence may begin with the weak, halfhearted cry to help us believe. But this too can grow, if we will nourish and protect it, taking root within the soul and bringing forth the fruit that will endure to eternal life. For to those who are given, more will be added.

1. I do this as a reader. But as a writer, I haven’t the courage. Yet. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Not so in my case, I’m afraid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Studiousness, that is, which is a virtue that goes well beyond the classroom. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Griffiths’ book was also responsible for making me aware of the danger of retreating behind other people in my writing and thinking. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. At least *I* think so. Others may not. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. And if you don’t know what that is, fear not. It won’t come up again. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The best place for high schoolers to be introduced to healthy questioning. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John Mark is now Provost of Houston Baptist. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Stan Guthrie’s *All that Jesus Asks,* for instance. Or [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Randy Newman’s *Questioning Evangelism,* which is a great little book. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. David Dark’s *The Sacredness of Questioning Everything,* most prominently. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. And if they are “questioning,” they may not exactly be “doubting.” But more on all that later. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. With due apologies to the north side of Chicago. I was raised near Seattle, and while my sports heartbreaks are not as old, they extend to every sport imaginable. Laughter is one way to ease the pain. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. There is, already here in the text, a difference between doubt and questions. We shall explore this further later on. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This book is for both sorts of folks. And for those who know people of both sorts. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. An answer to that fundamental paradox, perhaps. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Was Solomon depressed? Probably not really. But Ecclesiastes, which is written in a Solomonic way, isn’t exactly a chipper book. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Which should make us pause about questioning and doubt’s popularity at the moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This counts as “irony,” even for Alanis Morisette. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See The Philosophy of Inquiry for a good example of someone who gives it a sporting try. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The piece has a very descriptive title. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Yes, this is a joke. Yes, modern art is interesting. And also occasionally funny. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Though it does not need to be limited to that. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. It is true that you might only believe that there is such a statue because someone told you and you might not know yet. But you do *know* that you believe it, and that someone told you. See how this game is played? [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. In this instance, the Pharisees try to close that gap by answering the people’s question for them, but Jesus rejects their attempt and leaves it open. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. But often not in many classrooms, which are often more didactic in their approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. A common refrain from those with advanced degrees, in fact. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Not all those who are old have questioned well or are wise. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Many of whom are very interesting. Like Descartes! [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. I speak from experience. I have mangled both with flair. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. And represents, I worry, a misguided understanding of both the faith and our formation into it—but those are topics for another day. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. With a nod to T.S. Eliot, but more on all that later. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. I mean, if I could help it. Some unpleasantries are unavoidable. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. We bought them. I am, you might not be surprised to know, now a firm advocate for high quality tires. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. At least in the story we are given. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. And doubt our doubts. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. It is a mistake here to speak of “his” ideas at all. Ideas cannot be so possessed. See Paul Griffiths’ *Intellectual Appetites.* [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Such self-inquiry does not need to be obsessive, nor overly introspective. “Acquit me from hidden faults!” is the cry, and quick repentance is our prayer. If things are amiss, God will show them to us. And if God doesn’t, well, carry on. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Her foe, naturally, comes in the guise of a friend to her. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. And the payments for my transgressions not so swift as the paddle that I received when I arrived home. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. This is, I suspect, largely cultural. Honor and shame in other cultures are major means of motivating behavior. Less so for us, I think. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Mostly, we think about wrongs in terms of harms we cause other people. That’s not necessarily wrong, but maybe not sufficient. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Psalm 19:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. And one who wants to move it into the Godhead, if I read him correctly. Someone needs to write a book, “How (Not) to Speak of Peter Rollins.” [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Descrates has been demoted from philosopher to all-purpose whipping boy for the evils of modernity. RIP, buddy. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. It’s fitting the genre, I think. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. A life lesson: if we start our work by reacting against another, we shall almost certainly allow their deepest problems to sneak in the back door, unannounced. That is how we end up having to make virtues of vices, when we otherwise would not. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. In Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent. Which is a great book. And “contemporary” doesn’t simply mean in the 1970s. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. From *Fear and Trembling,* page 4. The emphasis at the end is mine. And for whatever it’s worth, I think Kierkegaard’s generous reading of Descartes is probably the right one. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. As if there could be such a thing as *mere* belief, he thundered! [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Not all that appears to be, is. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. And it may be honest. But it can also be lucrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Does this mean that everyone questions or doubts for these reasons? Of course not. But whether *we* do, well, that is a question we ought not to prematurely close, is it? [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. This sort of fundamentalism actually has very little to do with those books that are more referenced than read, *The Fundamentals.* Just for the record. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. The former on grounds of the atonement, which is a clause that raises a lot more questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Somehow I doubt the atheists found little comfort in the claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Nor are such anxious moments necessarily doubting, as we shall see. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Psalm 42:5. See also Psalm 43:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Notice: Jesus answers John’s question. It may be a cryptic answer at first glance, but he still answers. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Now Pope Benedict XVI. *Introduction to Christianity,* page 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. This was in a sermon I once heard, but I don’t know the name of the person who gave it. It has stayed with me for years and I am indebted to the anonymous source (to me, but not to God). The moral of the story is, always take notes in sermons. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Mark 8:27-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. The first “healing” being the Transfiguration, which happens immediately following this episode. And which records the disciples as being “terrified,” a stronger version of the fear that the women who came to the empty tomb knew. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Which judging by some of our rhetoric today, the place where we least expect God to show up is inside the confines of the church. Which is precisely where he is waiting. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. I owe this point to Father David Baumann. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. John 20:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. John 20:22. How to line up these two narratives? That is a very good question. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. John 20:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. I owe this point to Father David Baumann. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. I note the following: Matthew 21:21, Jude 1:22, Matthew 14:31, Luke 24:38, Hebrews 11:1-40, Romans 14:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. We give French philosophers too much credit, and therefore too much blame. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Peter Rollins notes that Jesus says in this in Aramaic, his native tongue, rather than the language of the Old Testament. I suspect that has more to do with the depths to which Jesus integrated the Word into himself, rather than an indication that he is leaving behind what was the standard Jewish practice of reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Emphasis mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. This all plays out in Abraham’s life in very interesting ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Even, I would note, the imaginative exploration of other conceptions of the topography. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Yes, those exist. And they are awesome. And so are, by the way, homeschoolers. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. This is a joke. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Fisticuffs at dawn for those who disagree. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Which is not necessarily always wrong. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. And those were *home-schoolers,* which makes me worry that it’s not as “counter-cultural” as it should be. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Answer well and get a gold star and some time on the X-Box. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. It may even be a skill that relying on Google too much works against. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Infographics were momentarily *the* thing for this reason: the best of them present complex relationships in beautiful forms. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Unless they consume lots and lots of literature about these things. While second-hand, the imaginative grasp could reach a point where it would be virtually equivalent to first-hand knowledge. At least I think. How this works is, admittedly, an open question to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. My criteria for the title of this book, you should know, had nothing to do with meeting felt needs. I had a draft written before the title came up, and I wanted it to come out of the book’s content. Also, I wanted it to sound nice. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. I am not sure if the conversation was “on the record,” so to speak, so I am withholding names. But this sort of “lowest common denominator,” anti-theological pragmatism is *rampant.* And it’s destroying evangelical Christianity from within. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Or maybe the problem is that we don’t write books that *breed* questions in readers. That is a problem as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Do I bite the hand that feeds me? Are clowns really, *really* scary? [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Now that you’re back from flipping to the end of the chapter to see if there are questions there, thank you for reading this book. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Have I done this perfectly? Of course not! My first instinct is *still* to defend answers, rather than inquire. But there are signs of hope more broadly: check out Wheatstone Academy, for instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Snark FTW. Also, cliches FTW. This lead-in has managed both. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Because, you know, it’s *easy* to reduce millennia of Christian teaching to a catchphrase! [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Plato’s greatest Christian incorporator, Augustine, writes in *Confessions* that what the Platonists missed out on Christianity provides. See Book VII, though the whole thing really must be read. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. This is the point that Charles Cochran makes in his classic book, *Christianity and Culture.* [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Other fun questions: why is salvation described as “new creation”? Why does Jesus call himself the “Son of Man?” And certainly there are others. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. And, I should note, the witness of those whose marriages have failed and the witness of those who forgo marriage altogether. My point is that the question requires a narrative, a vision of a full life, much more than it requires a sentence or proposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. It would be a good exercise for us to ask the reverse question: is singleness a great enough good to sacrifice marriage for? If it isn’t right now, then I’d suggest rereading the bit above about Lucy. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself…” [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. I was turned on to the relationship between love and witness through essays by Kevin Vanhoozer in *First Theology.* So I knew there was *something* there, even if I wasn’t quite sure what. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Cut to small group leaders, nodding grimly. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Rather than pursuing understanding of those answers, as I suggested we should do in my last chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Yes, it was a small sample size, because counting questions from children is a difficult task. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. I think that the most important beliefs we have rarely, if ever, rise to the level of consciousness in anything other than a vague, inarticulate form. At least at the beginning. As we grow and learn to see more clearly, we learn to see those things, too. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. *The Risk of Education,* 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Probably piece by piece, rather than wholesale. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. This is a problem called “confirmation bias.” And there’s almost no way around it. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. It might seem at a particular moment to us that he is not and we would still be justified in believing it, of course. Questions are not always defeaters, and having a belief momentarily defeated does not always mean you should instantly give it up. The “in fact” there is the entire question of apologetics, isn’t it? [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. I don’t mean to imply that we should simply pick and choose, here. How these questions work together is a good question. My thought is that they do. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. I really wish I was joking. But I’m not. <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/50058129/ns/today-today_news/> [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Unless one happened to live in Narnia, or thought he lived in Narnia, or even thought there was a reasonable chance that this world could be Narnia—in which case, question away. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Of course, as noted not every situation allows for this. But this is also why we reflect about our decisions—to discern the order and learn from them for the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Anyone who reads my blog knows that I do not often write in such ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. This is the appropriate place for a joke about my wife being totally blinkered that night, which is why she said “yes.” [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Otherwise known as the “multi-verse” version. (I kid, I kid.) [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. A point noted often enough in rejoinders to the puzzle. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Someday, I will speak of how I came to love the apostle Paul and his writings. Suffice it to say for now, it was not Paul that motivated me (originally) so much as a woman. It has always been for women, in fact. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Punk Rock: R.I.P. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. This was strangely unsuccessful, prompting my first serious inquiry into whether God is good. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. The denoument of this story, for the curious (shame on you!) is that I did go ask my father because I was interested in the problem. And we had a good conversation about things, wherein he was very helpful. Thanks, Dad. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. If this question doesn’t seem intelligible to you, that’s okay. It lurks beneath my previous book, *Earthen Vessels.* Available now for pennies on ebay and used bookstores everywhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. A humorous moment, given that I’d spent four weeks talking theology and the body. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Qualifications: the question might actually *be* an attempt to undermine someone’s authority. Discernment is hard. And leaders should work to provide reasons as much as possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Romans 4:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. I do not suggest that I am aware of everything I believe. In fact, it seems to me that I am not. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. I speak broadly here, not only of Christians. There is an undercurrent in some people’s rhetoric that faith makes people distinctively anti-intellectual. However, we should note that Christians aren’t solely to blame for the Hollywood-entertainment industrial complex. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. What we are worried will happen if we are wrong is often vague. And generally so are the questions. Fear breeds among the shadows, not in open sunlight. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. This is the move that Peter Rollins *really* does not like. It is also the move that the Bible makes consistently. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Paul is another witness, of course. And when he goes before Agrippa, he says quite a bit. Which is worth bearing in mind before we reject speaking altogether. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Novels, I think. And probably bad ones, though not intentionally. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Is there any more pretentious phrase than that which compliments people for the “voice” they have? [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Ecclesiastes 1:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. *Intellectual Appetites,* 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. *De Trinitate,* 10.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. See also: Psalm 25:1-5, Psalm 27:13-14, Psalm 31:23-24, Psalm 33:20-22, Psalm 37, Psalm 38:13-16, Psalm 39:7-8, Psalm 40, Psalm 62, Psalm 69:2-3, Proverbs 20:22, Isaiah 8:16-18, Isaiah 25:9, Isaiah 30:18, Isaiah 33:2, Isaiah 51:5, Lamentations 3:22-27 (this one is particularly good), Micah 7:7, Zephaniah 3:8, Hebrews 6:15 and 9:28, James 5:7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. It’s a similar process to that quote by Rainer Maria Rilke, who essentially says we shall wake up one day and have the answers all around us if we live the questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. And if we deny it, unmake us. The personal effects of “living a lie” are well known. This is partly why in Psalm 51 David prays that truth would be in his “innermost being.” [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. And all that is false shall be burned up like dross. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Did I ever fully succeed at this? Of course not! Did the rest of my group? I think so. I still credit that original community of 18 and the conversations we had the first two years for much of my intellectual development today. We weren’t the sharpest students in the world, but we cared more [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. But we should avoid the self-consciousness of the public martyr’s mindset, please, lest we have our reward in full. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God.* [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. RIP? [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. One way my own church home for five years, The Journey in St. Louis, did this by providing a moderated, closed online forum for church attenders to discuss their questions with each other. An experiment, it has proved (by and large) successful. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Which I struggle mightily to have, intuitive grasper that I am. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. How churches should interact with bloggers is a book of its own. But I wil not be writing it. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. While raising such doubts publicly may provide comfort to those who similarly struggle, what people in difficult emotional and intellectual circumstances need most is an empathetic ear and a hand on the shoulder from someone nearby, rather than on a blog thousands of miles away. For more on that argument, see my book *Earthen Vessels.* [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. And all the Chesterton fans nodded. (And knew this joke was coming.) [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. This is maybe the last argument that I would “win.” [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. I know my reasons are lying around somewhere. I just can never quite articulate them on the first go. My wife is very patient. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Remember what I’ve said all along about understanding being a journey into the unknown land of God? Bon voyage! [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Understatement much? [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Of course. While we’re open to being wrong, if we knew that we were wrong we’d change our beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. If one person is not inquiring, and so sees no gap between their beliefs and their person—then the problem will endure. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Seriously, the amount of throat-clearing about how much we love the other guy before going on to say why he’s absolutely, abysmally wrong is at points humorous. And good luck getting people to say their disagreements publicly, because they’re afraid of not being “team players.” Maybe it’s to the good. But it actually feels like a sign of our frailty, not maturity, as though demonstrating any sort of internal disagreement is going to bring the house of cards down. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. I am in no way suggesting that there are no wolves among the sheep—only that those who question are not necessarily among them. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. And why, in some corners, “dialogue” has become a joke. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Of course, what is a “first thing” in one realm may not be in another. And what the “first things” are may differ depending on the person. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Sometimes, the controversy erupts not by those who are genuinely questioning, but by those who have rejected those first principles and then offer the objections. I would argue that under such circumstances, we ought still proceed with a posture of open inquiry given that others observing the exchange may be somewhere in the middle. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. I owe this point to Doug Wilson. And I don’t think the cop-out of “He’s Jesus, we’re not” is much good. Jesus hands off authority to his disciples for *something.* [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Matthew 16:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. This hope of reconciliation does not mean Christians should never pronounce ideas “anathema” or even acknowledge when people’s beliefs have become heretical. But such pronouncements should be done with soberness, care, and grieving—rather than with the sort of eagerness that many corners of the Christian world seem to have. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. A process, I’ve pointed out elsewhere, that also engenders new ways of understanding than forgoing it altogether. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. A fact attested to by the oddish people who have learned Elvish. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. If they fall short, that is. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. A “system” that I have sometimes called a “framework,” “outlook,” or a “world.” [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. I’m pretty sure even the Anabaptists would be on board with this. Also, this is a joke. Settle down, Anabaptists. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Again, this does not entail rejecting them. Can I be more clear about this? [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. I choose this example because it is an obvious point of controversy that hinges on lots of other fundamental questions, like our understanding of the nature of the human person, the meaning of the body, the authority of Scripture, and the like. All these are tangled together, which makes traditional Christian teachings about sexuality feel like a fundamental, axiomatic commitment even if it isn’t in the creed explicitly. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Last time, I promise: see my book *Earthen Vessels* for the arguments here. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. As a one time moderator, I can verify that it is indeed a lot of fun. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Even C.S. Lewis had his opponents. *The Abolition of Man* has *someone* in mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. I have done all of these, I grant. But I work to make even my denunciations take the tone of “good news.” But even when that doesn’t happen, a good rule of thumb would be to keep your powder dry: if all we’re doing is disagreeing and dismissing, then our voice will lose its force. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. All descriptions appropriate to the church in Galatia, I think. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Though that would be reason enough. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. See *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions.* [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. As in, literally leans in. You can tell when people are really engaged in their questions because their body betrays them. Just like any public speaker can tell when an audience really cares what he has to say—their posture and physical presence gives them away. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Granted, far less than the tutor had presumably spent over the course of their lives. But not *nothing,* either. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Compare with the time I met someone who introduced themselves as director of AT&T’s coverage in the St. Louis area. “Oh,” I replied, “so you are the one responsible for all my dropped calls?” Not the most delicate moment of my life. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Yes, those conversations happen in my house. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. It was awkward. His response? “That is way too invasive a question for someone that you’ve just met.” It was beautiful. Also, awkward. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Loudly and dramatically is how I roll. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. I mentioned to my wife that I was including this story. Her response: “Wow, you’re really going to confess everything in this book, eh?” We take our questioning *seriously* in our household. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Just so we’re clear, I love Calvinists and Arminians. And my own bad habit has been to take every line of inquiry and head straight for the doctrine of creation, as I’m just convinced it’s gonna solve a lot of problems. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Also, I fight a recalcitrant contrarianism, I’m afraid. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)