

Some tough questions...

When people start to delve into their Christian faith, often many tough questions arise. I know this is what happened when I first came to Christ during my college years. I asked – and wrestled through answering – many questions. Some of my questions included, “Can the Bible be trusted? What does the Old Testament have to do with the New Testament?” and other like questions. Through long conversation, careful study of the Bible, and by prayer, I’ve come to answers to these and other questions.

Such questions are normal, and most Christians ask them at some point along their journey. Those of us who have come to satisfying answers in line with the biblical narrative sometimes forget about our own questioning hearts and minds about these subjects. So I was momentarily surprised when taking suggestions for topics of study in my Freshmen Bible Study group, instead of suggested topics, I received several tough questions about faith! The questions submitted, without alteration, are as follows:

How can the Bible be a historical text with errors (maybe) AND the Word of God?

Should the Old Testament be disregarded in the study of the Bible?

What does it mean to be born again?

What happens to people of other faiths?

How can we reconcile condemnation of homosexuals with unconditional love?

In response to these questions, I rethought through the conclusions I had come to in my journey, as well as how my conclusions have been expounded upon by further study, discussion, contemplation, and prayer. The following is what resulted. As much as possible, I tried to let scripture speak for itself within the context of the entire Bible, but particularly in the case of the first question, I of course had to look outside the Bible for answers. :)

I went through my answers to faith questions with the Freshmen Bible Study in about 90 minutes, working from my own sheet (which is the next two pages of this document). Afterwards, I handed out their own “cheat sheet” (pages four and five of this document). These are slightly different, so please read through both the facilitator’s copy and student’s copy.

I prefaced this whole time by saying that I am not infallible, but also that these were not “canned” answers but questions that I had asked along my own journey with Christ and these are the answers that I’ve come to. I told them that what I said during this time is not meant to squelch asking questions or be the end of the discussion on these topics but in fact should just be the beginning of a conversation about these things. I encouraged them to continue in discussion with others, to read the Bible, and to pray about these things.

Whether or not your students ask all of these questions simultaneously or individually, they will probably ask these questions in one form or another at some point. I hope the following pages can be used as a starting place for answering these tough questions with “truth in love” (Eph. 4:14-16).

Note: If possible, I would encourage NOT addressing all these topics, back-to-back, like I did in one session for the students. They could easily have each been given 90 minutes on their own for initial conversation.

The books referenced in question one are all books that I would encourage reading. On the facilitator’s copy, I noted several pages in each book that address to one degree or another question one. I didn’t read all of any of the referenced sections, but I just read a few paragraphs from each book during my presentation.

Please also keep reading after the next four pages, for a few more notes. I hope this is helpful!

Answers to some Faith Questions (facilitator's copy)
Questions brought up in FBS Fall 2007
Answers provided by Jeff Bergeson

~How can the Bible be a historical text with errors (maybe) AND the Word of God?

How We Got Our Bible pp. 51-53

Coffeehouse Theology pp. 72-81

The Case for Christ pp. 115, 144

~Should the OT be disregarded in the study of the Bible?

NO!!!

Marcion A.D. 140 (dualistic teaching deemed heretical)

First page of NT is Israel's history!

Each Gospel contains OT scripture, and even Paul (apostle to Gentiles) quotes OT on occasion.

Luke 24:44 (Jesus refers to all of Tanak)

2 Tim. 3:16 (All Scripture (i.e. OT) God-Breathed)

Romans 11 (We are in-grafted into Israel)

~What does it mean to be born again?

John 3:1-21 (Nic at Night)

1 Peter 1:23

Other similar language which expounds concept: being "born of God" 1 John 4:7; 5:1

2 Cor. 5:14-21 (new creation)

"Jesus never preached 'born again' to the crowds. He mentioned it once in the middle of the night (Nic at night). He preached the Kingdom of God. The word Christian is in the Bible 3 times, disciple is in there over 250 times." Lakita Garth, Main Speaker at Jubilee 2004
Acts 11:26 (first CALLED Christians)

Being "born again" and being "Christian" are important, but those specific terms are not prominent in the Bible. Being disciples of Jesus and entering into covenantal relationship with God by faith in and through Christ Jesus are more prevalent. So what does that mean?

Jer. 31:31-34 (what new covenant will be)

Matt. 26:28 (Jesus' blood poured out as new covenant)

Eph. 2:4-10 (by grace, through faith)

Rom. 10:8-13 (confess and believe)

1 Cor. 15:1-5, 12-19 (saved by gospel of Jesus' resurrection)

~What happens to people of other faiths?

What is faith?

“Faith is without merit in and of itself; its merit is found in the one in whom you have faith. If you have faith in the wrong thing or power, faith is of no use at all.”

~Dr. Byron G. Curtis

Idolatry? “in most cases the Old Testament authors do not distinguish between the worship of other gods, the worship of images and the worship of [Yahweh] using images” ~Brian S. Rosner; all of this is considered idolatry! (e.g. Exodus 32:4-5)

Isaiah 44. Read Isaiah 45:18-26

(it is foolishness to trust in idols turn to the only God, Yahweh, who alone saves!)

Meaning of Jesus’ name (Greek form of Hebrew, Joshua=Yahweh saves!)

Matt. 7:24-27 (build your house on the rock)

John 14:6-7 (no one comes to the Father except through Jesus)

So what happens??? Several biblical images:

~from Isaiah: The idolatrous nations “are nothing” (44:9), “will be put to shame...will be brought down to terror and infamy” (44:11), blind (44:18), are deluded and misled (44:20), “will bow down before [Israel]” acknowledging God (45:14), “will be put to shame and disgrace; they will go off into disgrace together” (45:16), and they are “ignorant” (45:20).

~from Jesus: Matt. 25:30, 46; Luke 12:8-9

~from Paul: 2 Thes. 1:9

Praise God, I’m not in charge of who inherits the Kingdom.

Ultimately...it’s up to God! And I trust Him to determine who does!

2 Pet. 2:9 “if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment until the day of judgment.”

~How can we reconcile condemnation of homosexuals with unconditional love?

How many times does Jesus bring up homosexuality? (zero!)

On the contrary Matt. 9:9-13 (Hos. 6:6 ...and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings).

Lev. 18:22; 20:13

1 Cor. 6:9-11 (only use of the word “homosexual” in the Bible (NIV))

Who is being addressed in the above two scriptures?

(the *people* of God...not those who *don’t* know God! The people of God should not behave this way. See Lev. 18:27-30)

(ex. of nature & nurture: Alcoholism runs in family...but must be “entertained” in order to show effects)

(Sodom & Gomorrah: Gen. 19:1-29; Ezekiel 16:49-50)

Jesus’ example of not condemning: John 8:1-11

Most importantly: Rom. 5:6-8 “while sinners!”

Answers to some Faith Questions
Questions brought up in FBS Fall 2007
Answers provided by Jeff Bergeson

~How can the Bible be a historical text with errors (maybe) AND the Word of God?

How We Got Our Bible by Ralph Earle (covers what the title suggests)
Coffeehouse Theology by Jim Thomas (answers some big questions very accessibly)
The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel (a journalist investigating the evidence for Jesus)

~Should the Old Testament [OT] be disregarded in the study of the Bible?

NO!!! :)

Marcion A.D. 140 (wanted to throw out Old Testament, and deemed heretical)
First page of New Testament is *intentionally* a retelling of Israel's history!
Each Gospel contains OT scripture, and even Paul (to Gentiles) occasionally quotes OT.

Luke 24:44 (Jesus makes clear he's in all of Jewish Scriptures)
2 Timothy 3:16 (All Scripture (i.e. OT) God-Breathed)
Romans 11 (Gentiles are grafted into Israel. Israel's history is our history!!!)

~What does it mean to be born again?

To my knowledge, only two references to this in all of New Testament:
John 3:1-21 (Nicodemus (i.e. religious leader, not crowds) at night!)
1 Peter 1:23

Other similar language, being "born of God" found in 1 John 4:7; 5:1
2 Cor. 5:14-21 (reference to being a "new creation" in Christ)

"Jesus never preached 'born again' to the crowds. He mentioned it once in the middle of the night to Nicodemus. He *preached* the Kingdom of God. The word Christian is in the Bible 3 times, disciple is in there over 250 times." ~ Lakita Garth, speaker at Jubilee '04
Acts 11:26 (first CALLED Christians, presumably as an insult)

Jer. 31:31-34 (describes what new covenant will be)
Matt. 26:28 (Jesus' blood poured out as new covenant)

Eph. 2:4-10 (we're saved by grace, through faith)
Rom. 10:8-13 (confess and believe to be saved)
1 Cor. 15:1-5, 12-19 (saved by gospel of Jesus' resurrection)

~What happens to people of other faiths?

“Faith is without merit in and of itself; its merit is found in the one in whom you have faith. If you have faith in the wrong thing or power, faith is of no use at all.”

~Dr. Byron G. Curtis, Geneva College Associate Professor of Biblical Studies

What is idolatry? “In most cases the Old Testament authors do not distinguish between the worship of other gods, the worship of images and the worship of [Yahweh] using images” ~Brian S. Rosner from *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*

all of the above is considered idolatry!

Isaiah 44 and Isaiah 45:18-26

(it is foolishness to trust in idols; turn to the only God, Yahweh, who alone can save!)

Jesus’ name is the Greek form of Hebrew name, Joshua, which means “Yahweh saves!”

Matt. 7:24-27 (build your house on the rock; review again Dr. Curtis’ quote above)

John 14:6-7 (*no one* comes to the Father except through Jesus)

So what happens??? Several biblical images:

~from Isaiah: The idolatrous nations “are nothing” (44:9), “will be put to shame...will be brought down to terror and infamy” (44:11), blind (44:18), are deluded and misled (44:20), “will bow down before [Israel]” acknowledging God (45:14), “will be put to shame and disgrace; they will go off into disgrace together” (45:16), and they are “ignorant” (45:20).

~from Jesus: Matt. 25:30, 46 (darkness, weeping, etc.); Luke 12:8-9 (disowned)

~from Paul: 2 Thes. 1:9 (punishment; shut out from the presence of the Lord)

Ultimately...it’s up to God! And I trust Him to determine who receives inheritance!

“If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment until the day of judgment.” ~ 2 Pet. 2:9

~How can we reconcile condemnation of homosexuals with unconditional love?

Jesus NEVER discusses homosexuality

He does say: Matt. 9:9-13

Lev. 18:22; 20:13

1 Cor. 6:9-11 (only use of the word “homosexual” in the Bible (NIV))

The above scriptures address the *people* of God...not those who *don’t* know God! The people of God should not behave this way. (See Lev. 18:27-30)

Sodom & Gomorrah (Gen. 19:1-29) NOT destroyed because of homosexuality

see Ezekiel 16:49-50 for why Sodom & Gomorrah destroyed

Jesus’ example of not condemning: John 8:1-11

Most importantly: Read Rom. 5:6-8 to see God’s love, which we are called to imitate

Some more notes regarding that last question:

While discussing the last question, a student also brought up Romans 1:18-32. This also speaks against homosexual activity, but still needs to be read within the broader biblical context and understanding that “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23-24).

Also, after this group presentation I said that I would be more than happy to talk with individuals further about any questions they had about what I said. One student wanted to talk more about the last question. When we met, she told me that she had recently heard a presentation by two Episcopalian Bishops who argued that “nowhere in the New Testament is homosexual behavior spoken against.” I told her that I had honestly never heard that before. She went on to say that they argued that biblical translators were biased and translated 1 Cor. 6:9-11 the way they did because of their discriminatory bias. I told her I would have to look into this because I had never heard that argument before.

While searching, I did find those arguments which, as I said, I had never heard before (i.e. that Paul does not actually speak against homosexuality, but rather against male prostitution and the abuse of pederasty in his day). However, I did also find further information which expounds upon how translators have translated the Greek into English.

Before going further, I told her two things first:

- 1) As the Church we are to lovingly hold our brothers and sisters in Christ accountable
- 2) I do not believe the Bible gives us authority to condemn others. However, neither does the Bible condone certain practices (e.g. embezzlement, lying, cheating, etc.) but *we* never have the right to condemn God's beloved creatures for whom He sent His Son. (see Gal. 6:1-2; Matt. 7:1-5; Rom. 14:9-13)

I went through all the English translations on www.BibleGateway.com of 1 Cor. 6:9 and, again, they all get at the same idea as presented at least in the NIV. While doing this, I found the English Standard Version to provide its translation with a very helpful footnote.

I also found an enlightening article on the subject of the translation brought up by the Bishops. If not read carefully, one could get the impression for justifying hating/condemning homosexuals, but I think if this article is read carefully, we see that it's really stating that certain sexual actions are simply not biblically appropriate expressions of sexuality. (As we discussed before...this is a fine line, but an important one. See #2 above.)

Here's a link to the article. It's a PDF webpage.

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/homosexuality_corinthians6.pdf

Again, I hope all these books, scripture, quotes, and thoughts are helpful for answering these questions. “And this is my prayer”...Php. 1: 9-11

In Christ,

Jeff Bergeson, Campus Ministry Staff, CCO