

Introduction

It was the summer of 2005. I was serving as summer program director at the Delta Lake Bible Conference Center – a campground of the Christian and Missionary Alliance nestled in the middle of Upstate New York. It was Friday night of another powerful week of Sr. High camp. The Holy Spirit was at work in the lives of the 150 students who were attending the camp, the counselors who were leading them, and support staff there for the summer. Our speaker had the idea of allowing the students to submit any questions they had about God, the Bible, faith, and its application in the life of a student. The plan was for he and I to sit on the stage and randomly choose questions from a bucket and answer them live on the stage during our last night of teaching.

Students were to submit questions throughout the week for us to review and prepare to answer. When Friday arrived we discovered that we had only received two questions to answer. That probably wasn't enough for us to fill an hour long "question and answer" presentation. I asked if he thought we should move forward with the Q&A idea with just two questions. While I have no problem stretching out an opportunity to talk about God I thought that it would be a stretch to fill an hour presentation with the two questions we received.

He responded, "I've got an idea. If this doesn't work I have a sermon I'll preach." I'm willing to go with the creative ideas that speakers have, so I was excited to see what God had planned for our night. As he made his way to the platform at the start of our session he handed stacks of paper to those sitting on the aisles and asked them to pass them down the row of students. When he arrived at the platform he said, "This last session was set aside to do a Bible and faith Q&A. We don't have enough questions yet, so I'm giving you 30 seconds to write down a question that you'd like us to address tonight. Then we'll randomly choose a question and answer it for you. Are you ready to write down a question? OK - ready, set, go!"

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I was surprised to see that pencils were flying as the students wrote down the first thing that came to their minds! We collected the questions and saw that we had plenty to work with. I surveyed them later that evening and found that we had received over 150 unique questions from that crowd of about 180 people. I guess they did have questions about God, the Bible, faith in Christ, and how to apply that faith in everyday life after all!

The speaker and I sat on stage poised to begin answering their questions. We sat side by side, microphones positioned before us on stage, our Bibles open on our laps. In the space between us sat a bucket with all of the slips of paper inside. We had yet to read any of them but the two that were submitted earlier in the week. After an initial time of prayer he indicated that I got to go first. I reached in and took out the first slip of paper. Holding the microphone to my mouth, I read:

“If a Christian commits suicide do they go to heaven or hell?”

Ok. We get to start with an easy one. My answer was something like:

“When a Christian dies they go to heaven no matter what sin they’ve committed even up until the point of death. I referenced the thief on the cross, to whom Christ said, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43.) Suicide is a sin, but so is hatred, gossip, lust, gluttony, lying, stealing, etc. (2 Corinthians 12:20, Romans 13:13, 1 Peter, 4:3, et al.) If someone did those during their dying seconds we believe they would still be ushered into God’s presence. It’s no different for someone who takes their own life.”

I then took the chance to explain how Christians wrestle with sin even after asking Christ to be part of their lives and introduced the topic of sanctification.

“Being a Christian doesn’t mean that we don’t sin anymore. While it’s possible for a Christian to live a life without sin because of the Holy Spirit, it’s not probable. We sin every day. Being a Christian means that Christ has paid the penalty of our sin and no matter what sin we commit we will be in His presence forever when we die. While we’re still here on the earth the Holy Spirit is doing His work of sanctification in our lives – purifying us day by day into the image of Christ.”

I also addressed what brings a person to the point of suicide.

“In my experience and training I’ve learned that those who attempt suicide do it as a reaction to an extreme hurt or trauma in their lives, some sort of abuse they’ve experienced over time, or depression. There might be other reasons, but those are some I’ve experienced. I choose to view those who are struggling with suicidal thoughts as someone in need of care, attention, and Christ’s love. I refuse to see them as someone who is separating themselves from God – here on earth or eternally – or someone who is going to be punished by God for taking their own life.”

I looked at the speaker, indicating that I was done answering that question and he began to reach for the first question he would address. At that point one of the counselors stood up and said, “I don’t agree with your answer.” There was a general commotion, over which he added, “I don’t think that anyone who commits suicide can go to heaven - ever. Someone who commits suicide MUST go to hell,” he emphasized.

I turned to the speaker and asked if he agreed with my answer or the counselor. He indicated that he agreed with my answer and asked the counselor if he had any Scriptural evidence for his position.

“I don’t need Scriptural evidence,” he said. “Everyone knows that someone who commits suicide goes straight to hell.” He sat down among a growing chorus of “Amen” and “I agree” from the crowd. We obviously hit a sore spot.

I again began to address the initial question, pointing out that there are some religious traditions that embrace the concept that someone who takes their own life cannot go to heaven when they die, but that the Bible doesn’t agree with that position. I realize that suicide is the most desperate act someone can do – and I never want anyone to be in that place in life, but that suicide isn’t the one horrible sin that God cannot, or will not forgive.

I took my arguments in a new direction.

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“Mankind would like to apply a scale to sin. We place good things on one side of the scale and bad things on the other. We would like to think that one sin is more serious than another. We believe that murder is high on the “bad” side of the scale. We believe that telling a white lie is low on the “bad” side of the scale. The bigger the sin, the more good we have to do to erase the consequences of the sin. Going to church, praying, reading our Bibles, and helping old ladies across the street all add to the “good” side of the scale. We rank all other sins somewhere on the scale and subconsciously (if not consciously) we rank ourselves on how “bad of sinners” we each are.”

I’ve used this part of our nature as a technique to explain the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ a number of times. You can play along as you read this if you’d like. I ask the person I’m taking to draw a line on a piece of paper. I call this the “Good vs. Bad” scale. At the end of the line on the left hand side mark “Satan,” and on the right hand side of the line mark “God.” Next put an “x” where you think you are and write “me” above it.

Most people will put their mark about 65-75% of the way towards God. Most of us think that we’re mostly good – or at least not as bad as the next guy. At this point the diagram looks something like this:

Good vs. Bad Scale

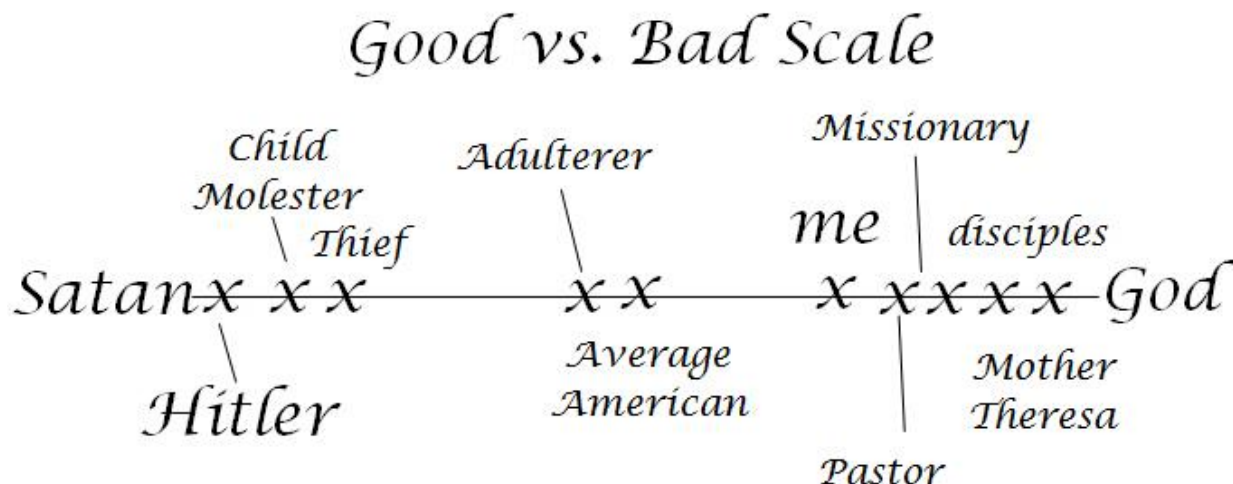


Next I ask them to mark where they think Hitler falls on the line. After all, he holds the position of “most evil man ever to exist” in most people’s minds. Then I ask them to mark where Mother Theresa falls on the line. She holds the position of “best person ever to live” with most people who are familiar with her work in Calcutta. I then ask them to place the average American on the line. Most people put the average American right about in the

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middle. I then ask them to rank the disciples (except Judas), then a child molester, then a thief, then a missionary, then a pastor, etc. The space between “me” and “God” tends to get quite crowded as the person realizes that there are a lot of people who are much “better” than they are.

A typical person’s diagram looks like this:



Then I point out that every single one of those people I mentioned have sinned and belong at the same place as Satan. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Every single one of us deserves an eternity separated from God (Romans 6:23). Include Christ’s words found in Matthew 5:21-30 that tell us that we’re judged by the intention of our hearts and not just the things we do, and we realize that each of us is an adulterer, a thief, and a murderer in our hearts. In fact, we’ve all broken the Ten Commandments at least once in our lives!

It is only through the love, the sacrifice, the grace, the forgiveness, the mercy of Christ that any of us can stand in His presence (John 3:16, Ephesians 2:5, Romans 10:9, et al). When we realize the weight of our sin, we realize that in God’s eyes we are no different from Hitler, Mother Theresa, a pastor, a missionary, or the disciples. We all stand before Christ condemned because of our sin and in need of a savior – who is Jesus Christ our Lord.

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Back to the night at Delta...

Someone asked if I was supporting someone taking their own life so that they could be with Christ sooner. My response was, “Absolutely not!” Life in heaven is not the only place where we experience life with Christ. We experience that here on earth as well. While I understand what experiences in life can bring someone to consider taking their own life, as a pastor, I help people overcome the effects from these experiences so they can find the hope and healing that comes through relationship with Christ. God is the giver of life. He is the one to determine the number of our days. Who are we to take the number of our days into our own hands?

Other questions were asked from the floor and addressed by myself and the speaker at camp that week. We eventually made it past the first question and tackled a few more, but that first question made a really big impression on me. After our formal service ended many students remained in the Youth Tab to talk with us about what was on their hearts. I watched many counselors talking to and praying with many students that night. Many of the adult leaders spent hours in the Youth Tab talking with and praying with students and counselors as well.

That night I spoke with more than a dozen students who had attempted suicide themselves, who had lost a friend or family member to suicide, or who were contemplating suicide if their lives didn’t change soon. It was a powerful night of ministry! I still remember hearing one student say, “If I didn’t meet God at Delta this week I was planning on ending my life when I got home next week.” She met God that week and we were able to help her get the help she needed to ensure that her journey with God was one of growth after she went home.

I will never forget that night of ministry at Delta Lake! Through that experience God impressed a few things on my heart. I began to keep these things in mind as I ministered to others. I’ve found them to be useful as I make new relationships, I teach the deeper things of Christ, and I develop new leadership. They became an important part of my own personal methodology of making disciples. I call it...

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Question Asking Discipleship Methodology

It might actually exist as an official methodology in a spiritual formation class, and it probably has a better name than the one I use, but this works for me. Here are the primary points:

- Everyone has questions.
- Sometimes people are afraid to ask their questions.
- People learn best when there is a place where they can ask their questions and have them answered in a thorough way.
- We can identify where a person is in their personal spiritual formation by listening to the questions they ask.
- When a spiritual mentor takes the time to answer someone's questions they are able to learn at the exact growth point they are in their faith.
- Our typical current church structure isn't presenting a platform for most people to ask their questions and have them answered.
- If we want to make disciples of Jesus Christ the way Jesus did we have to develop a way for questions to be asked and answered.

The closest place we have in the modern church model for question asking and answering is usually in a Sunday school class or small group. The primary stumbling block for this model of Q&A is that the questions are usually driven by the teacher or the curriculum being covered. The teacher has to keep in mind the needs of the entire class. Many times one person has a lot of questions and they take up the whole class time with their questions. While this class is usually productive for that one person, many others in the class may feel as if it was a waste of time for them to be there. Especially if the questions asked were recently covered in recent classes – before the person arrived at the church, or was absent for.

A one-on-one discipleship model provides the best platform for meaningful question asking and answering. In this model a mentor is meeting one-on-one with the person they are discipling on a regular basis. These discipleship meetings can be used to answer their questions, encourage them in their faith, pray with, challenge them to take their next steps,

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and can address a variety of other discipleship areas. Here the questions being asked are 100% pertinent to the life of the person being disciplined because they are the ones who are developing the questions.

I have also learned that it's not possible for a teacher to meet the spiritual needs of everyone in any given class. How can a teacher adequately address the questions of a seeker, a new believer, someone who is struggling in sin, someone who has attended church for years without reading Scripture themselves, and someone who is mature in their faith – all at the same time? It's just not possible to teach all of these people at the same time! Some are going to be bored. Some are going to say the material is way over their heads. Some are going to quit. Some are going to argue. Some are going to learn.

Yes, I believe that the Holy Spirit will take the truth of God's Word and apply it to different people's lives just where they're at whenever God's Written Word is taught or preached, but I also think it's our responsibility to develop avenues that enhance spiritual growth. In one-on-one discipleship relationships the discipler can ascertain the pulse of where the student is in their faith and customize the lesson right at the merge point for that one student. Sometimes this can be done well with a class setting, especially if the class is designed for a spiritual level (beginning, intermediate, expert, etc.), but it can be done BEST through one-on-one discipleship meetings.

Everyone Asks Questions

The purpose of this piece of writing is to provide some answers to questions that everyone asks at some point in their walk with Christ. There are no unimportant questions. If it's a question on your mind and heart then it's important for you to find the answer so that you can go to the next level in your journey with Christ. Then, at the next level, new questions will come to your mind and heart as you study and experience life with Christ. Those questions need to be answered as well. The need to have questions answered should never end as we continue to grow and be challenged.

The questions that I address in this piece of writing are REAL questions that have been asked by REAL people as they progress on their journey with Christ. Some of them are questions that you already know the answer to. Some of them may be questions that you're

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seeking the answer to. There probably are people around you right now who have these very questions in their own spiritual journey. Perhaps the Lord has placed this book in your hands so that you're better prepared to help them find Christ or grow in their walk with Him.

What if I Have More Questions?

You will have more questions. My prayer is that through this piece of writing *some* of your questions will be answered. I realize that this will then lead you to more, deeper questions. You can feel free to email them to me at actsoflight@actsoflight.com and you may see them addressed in a future piece of writing. If you can't wait until then you should pray about who God has placed in your life to develop a one-on-one discipleship relationship with where you can ask the tough questions and find the godly answers.

The 3rd Choice

A friend of mine named Jim Walton has a phenomenal ministry called The 3rd Choice that answers spiritual questions live online. His entire ministry is designed to engage with seekers, find out their questions, and take the time to personally answer them in email or chat sessions online.

You can check out his Facebook page or website, read through his writings, and ask him a question today.

<https://www.facebook.com/The3rdChoice?fref=nf&poref=story>

www.the3rdchoice.org

In Got Questions – Jesus Has the Answers!

I take the opportunity to answer 18 tough questions about Jesus. I hope you get the book and explore these answers for your own walk with Christ and so that you are able to answer the questions of those around you!