

TOUGH QUESTIONS

1 Corinthians 3:18-23

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What are the three most difficult words for a man to speak? “I don’t know”. We will be looking at tough questions for a couple weeks and some will have to look into the answers because we may not know ourselves.

“Why don’t pastors know everything about God?” (2 inquiries)

One day, one of our grandkids asked me a question about something I can't recall offhand, and I gave an answer. His response to me was, "How did you get to know so much?"

Well, when you've been around for six or seven decades, if you're observant you pick up a few insights and bits of information along the way.

Hopefully, we adults do have more knowledge than those just starting out in life – you sort of learn on the job – some learn and some don't. Mark Twain (allegedly) put it this way: “When I was ten my parents knew everything; when I was 20, they knew nothing; when I was 30 I realized I was right at ten.”

So, what about pastors? We stand on a podium or at a lectern; read scripture and offer insights and interpretations. Sometimes you find yourself agreeing with what's said and think to yourself (but never say it out loud), “Preach it, pastor!”

Then there are other times something is put forth and you say to yourself, “I don't believe that”, and the image of a pastor as a storehouse of wisdom begins to erode. Or, it might seem that the pastor has it all together, a biblical answer for everything, but then you face an issue in your life, seek counsel and perhaps the guidance given is less than fulfilling and suddenly that image of wise counsel begins to fade

You've probably noticed that in sermons I often talk about spiritual struggles I have had in my life or maybe facing at the time as has David (illness) and Greg (bicycle accident). As we bring these things before we show what we have learned. This can help others in their journey.

Dan was a member of my congregation in Scottdale who said to me on one occasion, “I didn't think ministers had the same questions and doubts, and when you said you did, it helped me deal with them.” That's because Dan and I explored and prayed about those things together, learning from each other. Dan's life experience was different from mine, so I learned from him and

he from me. My thought has always been if I can learn something that is helpful to me, if I can share it with you that might help you along as well

You see, God sent His Son, Jesus to be here on earth among us, as one of us. If God had made an appearance Himself, it would have been overwhelming, we couldn't relate. Jesus came as a man; He worked in a carpenter shop, He knew about learning a skill, about economic realities, about family issues, about success and disappointment, about love and rejection. So, since we share that in common, we can relate to Jesus' example and teachings.

We can learn and grow in faith because we understand He knows what we face.

I want you to know that I have questions, doubts and struggles in my life and believe if I can come to gain some Godly guidance through those, I can help you do the same.

If we pastors did have all the answers, you would most likely say, "That's fine for you, Reverend, but my experience is different and I can't relate to what you're offering.

In relation to that – I had someone tell me one time that I didn't live in the real world. This guy thought I was somehow isolated from what everyone else has to deal with. That really upset me and my response was, "How real is it to stand beside the bed of someone who is about to die and pray with them? Or be with the victim of an accident or someone facing the sudden death of a loved one? Or to lead a funeral for a young mother shot by her boyfriend, or bury someone's little baby? Or try to minister to the sister of a murder/suicide victim? Or help a family who lost their home and needed someplace to stay?" I'd say that's all pretty real.

My point would be that we as pastors are in life together with you – struggling with you, seeking answers with you, and together we can grow in our knowledge and understanding.

Now, let's move on to the next topic – We have 4 questions that are inter-related
We'll look at two together first...

If all religions lead to God why do Christians insist theirs is the only “right” way?

If God created every person and loves every person, but accepts into heaven only those who believe in Jesus as Savior why it is that all others “roast “?

Suppose you asked me for directions from here to my house in Grove City. There are a number of ways I can give you to get there. Go up to Evans City, take 528 through the woods to the Stone House, take 8 to Harrisville, go left and then cross the creek at the college and turn left. Nice scenic road, but complicated and maybe you can't get there that way because a bridge is out. Or I can say, "Take 79 north, exit at Grove City, turn right on Tidball, left on Clark and you're there – and I know you can get there that way because I took it myself this morning

Now, translate that to asking about finding one's way to heaven, eternal life – how do you get there? Some religions will tell you it's based on your works – you earn your way in by doing good things and avoiding the harmful, bad things. We ought to do that, but it won't get you there. Some religions will propose finding God's favor through certain means of worship/sacrifice, observance of rituals.

Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that Jesus is "the Way, the Truth and the Life" and as

Christ himself says, "No one comes to the Father, but by Me." (John 14:6) James addresses the question of works vs. faith in James 2 where he reminds us that our faith needs to be backed up, or given evidence that it exists through tangible means: it's because of our faith that we carry out mission as evidence of how God and Christ have blessed us. The works are in response to God's graciousness to us, not an attempt to attain it

So if someone was to ask me for directions to eternal life, to the heavenly kingdom, I only know of one way for sure, and I know that because it's what our Lord has told us – I trust His word as Son of God. Acts 4:12 "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

To some, that sounds arrogant and exclusive, but it is really quite the opposite. Rather than being a religion that EXCLUDES, we are a faith that is INCLUSIVE of ANYONE, without regard to ethnicity, culture, geography, or even worthiness. Salvation was granted to the repentant thief crucified next to Jesus. Salvation was given to not only Jesus' own people and background of Judaism, but also to Romans, Syro-Phonecians, Greeks, an Ethiopian, anybody who received Christ as Savior

John 3:16

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." WHOEVER believes!

Romans 10:9

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” That’s the way! It’s not what you do, it’s what you believe - it’s what we call grace. It is undeserved, and available to all. No one needs to be left behind – no one needs to “roast”

The most important decision we make in life is what we believe about Jesus Christ

If we accept Him as Lord and Savior, we are assured of salvation. If we reject Him we are lost. It’s up to us. The gift is given to all of us, but as with any gift, we need to receive it and accept it.

If Christianity is the way, why are there so many denominations?

There are over 200 Protestant denominations and about 2 dozen Catholic varieties of the Christian faith, not to mention the countless independent churches you see around.

When Jesus concluded His earthly ministry, there was essentially one expression of Christianity, but that didn't last long. In Acts 15 we read about the Conference at Jerusalem; some Christian leaders wanted converts of faith to follow Jewish traditions and rituals; Paul and Barnabus disagreed. They ironed that one out, but it illustrates how divisions arise.

Paul and Barnabus had a falling out not long after that over a coworker, John Mark. They each went their own way – they split. In church history and we see divisions based on geography, language, culture, biblical interpretation, etc.

John Calvin (Presbyterian) lived in the time of the Bubonic plague. As a result, he had a fatalistic view of things and it influenced how he saw things. John Wesley saw great poverty and social oppression – constructed the Methodist faith around a combination of spiritual and social ministry – a tradition we continue today

Martin Luther saw corruption in the church and brought about the Reformation.

The Anglican faith, from which Methodism came, resulted from Henry VIII disagreements with the pope, so the church in England broke off.

The Orthodox faith developed as Greek, Russian, Byzantine, due to culture differences. Catholicism split over authority of the pope.

Methodism split over slavery, authority of clergy and today struggles with issues of sexuality, Biblical interpretation, and obedience to order.

We're divided because we're human beings. When we split up it's usually because of strongly held beliefs, right or wrong. Even heresies over the centuries often sprang from the best of intentions

Apostle Paul speaks of how a human body is made up of many parts, each with its own purpose and how all those parts are essential. Perhaps we can view the church that way as well – each has its own character, its strengths and its weaknesses. Perhaps it's good that we have churches around our community that differ in worship style, in missional priorities, in outreach to a particular ethnic group.

While less prevalent now than in the past, in Pittsburgh there have been Polish churches, Italian, Slovakian, Russian, German and many others, each serving their community.

I pray for the day that our brothers and sisters in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and AME Zion might come together to join with us simply as Methodist. We have Chinese churches, Korean churches and Spanish churches where folks can feel at home in their own language and worship style – something to celebrate, something to learn from.

I've learned from my friends who are Mennonite, Lutheran, Catholic, and Baptist. I attended a Presbyterian seminary; all of which helped affirm my personal faith.

Howard Jones, an evangelist held a crusade in Oil City. There we could come together of all faiths; true unity despite the differences.

Now, one last related question...

Why did Jesus come to earth when He did 2000 years ago? Why isn't there an update?

Jesus came to earth at a time when the faith could readily be spread around the known world

Rome had come to dominate everything in the Middle East, Europe and into Africa and parts of Asia. They built roads that went everywhere and ships sailed into ports all around the Mediterranean and beyond. That is what made it possible for Paul to establish churches in places like Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Colossae and Rome itself.

This interaction of commerce enabled Christianity to spread all over the known world and as the world got larger the faith went with it – so it was an opportune time to plant seeds.

Now, why not an update? James 13:8 puts it most succinctly - “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.” Jesus’ teachings are timeless, not guided by culture.

We may be inclined to interpret those teachings in different ways, but wherever we are as

Individuals, congregations or denominations come down on an issue, the truths taught by Christ are timeless and unchanging. It is essential that we seek to truly understand what Jesus said and lived and taught so as to have a right interpretation of these things

I hope these thoughts have been helpful to you. I'd be happy to discuss them in greater length with you when the opportunity presents itself. Remember that God is not put off by our questions. It's only through asking, seeking and discovering that we can grow in our faith, our witness and our service.

Let's pray.