

# How to ask good questions / Critical Thinking

“learn to ask questions”<sup>1</sup>

Questions in different areas:

- A. Relationships
- B. Evangelism
- C. Bible Study
- D. Learning
- E. Discernment

## A. Relationships

Relationships grow and deepen through “sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personalistic self-disclosure”<sup>2</sup>

Interested, open questions that help someone to reveal something of themselves – not prying but polite, sensitive, warm, humble and loving

- Facts
- Opinions
- Feelings

## B. Evangelism

- Find out where someone is
- Help them see what they believe and the implications of what they believe

What are you talking about? What do you think is the problem with the world? What are you hoping for? What do you love most about your god? Why don't you go to church? Do you know what will happen to you when you die?

## C. Bible Study

Love the Lord your God with all your mind. Ask as many questions as you possibly can of a passage:

- What? Who? Why? When? How? Where?
  - What am I learning about God?
  - What am I learning about man?
- What do I not understand? Write down all the questions you have – answered and unanswered.
- Read the passage with other people – especially children – and see what questions they ask.
- Have a project as you read the Bible – e.g. What is faith and what is the relationship between faith and good works?

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*, Nelson: 1985, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> [Arthur Aaron, 'The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings', \*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin\*.](#)

## D. Learning

“Schooling is not the same as education.”<sup>3</sup> Difference between gathering facts and rules and deep, insightful thinking and learning.<sup>4</sup>

We need critical thinking

We need to recover a childlike humility and hunger to know – “The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know” (1 Cor. 8:2) – “As our circle of knowledge expands, so does the circumference of darkness surrounding it.” (Albert Einstein).

Critical thinking: “We observe carefully. We ask questions. And we work hard with our minds to try to answer the questions. And we weave the answers into an evermore extensive fabric of understanding that helps us live lives of love to the glory of Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

1. Observe carefully
  - a. “Make a mental choice to focus your mind”<sup>6</sup>
  - b. See all of what is actually there, see the obvious
2. “Asking questions is the key to understanding”<sup>7</sup> – cf. small children
  - a. Get over the fear of looking silly, crucify pride
  - b. “Humble questioning that expresses eagerness to grow and to uncover truth”<sup>8</sup> Not displaying our cleverness or trying to trip people up or score points.
3. Work hard with our minds
  - a. “all training is painful and frustrating on the way to skills that later become second nature and lead to greater joy... Embrace the pain of learning.”<sup>9</sup> “the mind must be pushed, filled, stretched, and forced in order to function.”<sup>10</sup>
  - b. Seek to understand them on their own terms
  - c. Analyse logic, test hypotheses
4. Weave – integrate – make connections – see the whole
  - a. “When any new fact enters the human mind it must proceed to make itself at home; it must proceed to introduce itself to the previous denizens of the house.”<sup>11</sup>
  - b. Think through implications and application to your life. Make it part of your life.
5. Live lives of love to the glory of Jesus
  - a. Think how you can use this to serve others.<sup>12</sup>

Expression deepens impression

Calvin’s habit – at the end of the day, review everything learnt

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<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God*, Crossway, p. 48. Education is learning.

<sup>4</sup> *Ordering*, p. 93, 97.

<sup>5</sup> *Think*, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> *Think*, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> *Think*, p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Think*, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> *Think*, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> *Ordering*, p. 92.

<sup>11</sup> J. Gresham Machen quoted in Piper, *Think*, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> “We do not develop our intellects... for our own personal advancement, but we put our thinking power to work for the use of others.” (*Ordering*, p. 103). Piper makes the same point in *Think*, ch. 13.

## E. Discernment

“They are victimized because they have not taught themselves how to think”<sup>13</sup>

- a) Information Discernment – ask questions of what you are sent
- b) People Discernment – ask questions of people

Check the logic:

1. Inconsistencies, contradictions
2. Vagueness
3. Conclusion doesn't necessarily follow from the premise – “All dogs have four legs. This animal has four legs. Therefore this animal is a dog.”
  - a. Causation is *assumed* not proven – “The pope came, the economy improved, therefore the pope improved the economy”
  - b. Clustering effect – “There have been 10 cases of cancer in this village so there must be witchcraft or polluted water or poisoning” – may be random cluster of data
  - c. Slippery slope argument - “If we start to try to help someone we will have to help everyone and get distracted from our main work”
  - d. Appeal to results/consequences – “I believed this and it has worked for me so it must be right” or “If we don't go along with this we will be in big trouble”
  - e. Appeal to character – “This book is published by bad people therefore it's wrong”
  - f. Appeal to popularity – “Millions of people believe this so it must be true”
  - g. Stereotyping and generalising from anecdotal evidence – “Americans are liars, I know that because I met an American and he lied to me”
4. False premise or assumed premise – “The laws of nature cannot be violated therefore miracles cannot happen”
  - a. Complex question – “Have you stopped beating your wife?”
  - b. False dilemma – “Either God is all powerful or God is all loving”
  - c. There is no smoke without fire – “I heard that the CIA planned 9/11” – but maybe it's not smoke
  - d. Straw man – “Arminians believe you have to save yourself” or “Calvanists believe we are robots controlled by God”
5. Pure assertion or appeal to emotion – “Give me an amen!” or “That is a horrible thing to say!” or “In my personal opinion”

Check the source – social media, search engines, unsolicited email:

1. What? Check the spelling and punctuation and presentation – is this credible as a source or an official communication?
2. Who? Is author provided? What credentials? Where are they coming from (in thought)?
3. Who? Is publisher provided? Are they reliable? What is their normal agenda/perspective?
4. When? Is date provided? (e.g. “IS attacking village and killing Christians”)
5. Where was it written? (e.g. “If you see child with address round neck don't go to address”)
6. Check the sources – i.e. the original publisher (e.g. with Whatsapp message – did CNN or Department of Education or Cancer Research really issue this statement?) or the cited supporting evidence – is there any, does it actually exist, is it credible, does it support?<sup>14</sup>
7. Be aware of our own biases – esp. confirmation bias – we want to hear our views confirmed

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<sup>13</sup> *Ordering*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> Wikipedia is not a quotable source but it does have the advantage of being open to revision. It can be helpful to give an introduction to a topic and it can give links to helpful real sources (articles and books) to follow up.

## Resources:

[Jinsi ya: Kuuliza maswali vyema](#)

[How to write your Research \(Joy\) Paper](#)

[John Piper, \*Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God\*](#)

[Website Evaluation Guide, Easy Bib](#)

[10 warning signs that something on the internet is crackers](#)

[Mortimer Adler, \*How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading\*](#)

[Randy Newman, \*Questioning Evangelism\*](#)

[David Murray on 20 Cognitive Biases](#)

[Michael Ramsden on Logic and Fallacies](#)