

# The Faithfulness of Asking Questions

Is it OK to ask questions about our faith?

The word “*hammat*” (חמם) in Hebrew means “hot spring” or “warm bath”. There were several “hammatim” around Jerusalem in ancient times and some are still there today within a 1-2 hour drive from Jerusalem: Ein **Kedem**, Ein **Gedi** or **Hamat Gader**. You can reach many of these springs by going west on Highway 1 out of Jerusalem to a region called the **Ayalon** Valley. Although the location is now disputed, one hot spring near Jerusalem was simply called “Hammat”. Later, the Greeks renamed it “Emmaus”.

Jesus had said that he would rise three days after his death. On that third day, according to Luke, women took spices and went to his tomb near Jerusalem and encountered “two men (presumably angels) in clothes that gleamed like lightning” who said that Jesus had risen. Today we read about two people who, on that same day, after learning about the empty tomb, started out for Emmaus - about a seven-mile walk from Jerusalem to the west. No doubt, they were full of questions. We can imagine what they were: How could this be true? Did the disciples steal the body? Did the women see a ghost? (Ghosts are generally not friendly in scripture. See Mt. 14:26, Luke 24:37-39, 1 Samuel 28:7-20, Leviticus 19:31, II Corinthians 11:14-15, etc). Were the women and the disciples so full of fear and grief that they simply saw what they wanted to see when they went to the tomb? As they asked questions (and debated), suddenly a stranger caught up to them and asked them what they were talking about. “Are you the only “*paroikeys*” (visitor, stranger, migrant) in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place?” “What things?” said the lone traveler. His own question prompted the two who had come from Jerusalem that day to tell him what they knew. They told him about Jesus of Nazareth, about his claim to be a great prophet, about his death, about the women at the tomb earlier that day, and perhaps they asked him some of the same questions they’d been asking each other which apparently conveyed more disbelief than belief to the stranger. Perhaps they were getting all wrapped up in the logistics. Maybe they were trying to understand what had happened from their own human understanding, trying to logically fit the pieces together like a mathematician would try to solve an equation that just doesn’t compute. But what had happened wasn’t an equation. Their summary of the events that day had no equal to their experience. So the stranger began to interpret what had happened, not from a logical perspective, but from the perspective of story, the story of the Hebrew people through ages of wandering and wondering, settling and unsettling, belief and disbelief, prophetic warning and messianic prophecy. This story may have included

Moses' declaration that God would raise up "a prophet like me" (Deut. 18:15-19) who would lead a new exodus out of slavery. The stranger's story may have included this passage from Isaiah: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations" (Isaiah 42:1).

As they neared the hot spring after their seven mile walk, the stranger appeared to be going someplace else. But the two convinced him to stay for dinner and it was then that the stranger revealed himself to be none other than the risen Christ. Now in the gospels of Matthew and John, Jesus appears to the women at the tomb. But in Luke and early manuscripts of Mark, Jesus doesn't appear at the tomb. The first time we meet the risen Jesus in Luke's gospel is in the middle of a debate (on the road to a hot spring!). Dr. Margaret Aymer teaches Greek and New Testament at Austin Theological Seminary. She says, "By making the debate on the Emmaus Road the first sighting of the risen Christ in this gospel, Luke acknowledges the legitimacy of asking questions." (She doesn't say anything about the legitimacy of soaking in a warm bath, but maybe that doesn't need theological justification.) Legitimacy of questions? Absolutely! But questions aren't just legitimate, not just helpful; I think they're essential for getting to deeper truth and deeper faith. I don't think God wants us to swallow answers hook, line and sinker. She wants us to come to our own conclusions through conversation and debate - possibly heated debate - with reason and careful thought.

I don't know where you get news about local and world events, but reading any news source these days feels much more like advertising to me than news (information about what's going on). FOX has an audience. NPR has an audience. Newsmax, CNN, MSNBC and social media information outlets all have audiences and they must all tell stories that they think will appeal to their supporters. Show me a news outlet that boasts fair and balanced news, and I'll show you an organization with a bottom line. They rely on people to choose THEIR version of truth and as a result, because most people probably don't pay attention to more than one news source, they fall into a particular world view. Then they stop asking questions and then they swallow answers from their chosen news source hook, line and sinker. With stories about what's going on in the world being told from such vastly different perspectives, it's no wonder we feel so divided. Watching progressives and conservatives debate each other looks like battle and, if you dare to get involved, you risk getting skewered. Asking questions and debating with people who think differently was risky in Jesus' day and it's still risky, but how else are we to get to deeper truth? It's so tempting to hang around people who agree with us, either online or in person, but then we run the risk of crystallizing our worldview instead of deepening it. Maybe the way to begin to engage in risky conversations is to ask questions.

The three who walked the road to Emmaus may not have had copies of [Guidelines for Presbyterians in Times of Disagreement](#) in their back pockets, but I know you do! And if you don't, I've made copies that are available in the narthex (lobby). It just so happens that asking questions appears early on in those guidelines:

Step 1: Treat each other respectfully so as to build trust, believing that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus the Christ; keep conversations and communications open for candid and forthright exchange; AND don't ask **questions** or make statements in a way that will intimidate or judge others.

Step 2: Learn about various positions on the topic of disagreement.

Well, how are we supposed to learn unless we ask questions?

What about public debates today? The most visible ones are between politicians who are running for office, and so the focus of debate is much more on who is the best candidate than how we should think about a particular issue. They do talk about issues, but their debates don't seem (to me) like they're trying to get at deeper truth. It would be a liability, in fact, for a politician to say, "Gee, you make a good point. I'll have to think about that some more." And increasingly, respect is not part of their engagement. There is more disbelief than belief that the other candidate really has the best interests of the city, state, country or world at heart - and proving to the audience that their opponent is to be distrusted because they don't care has become the center of the debate. You may remember the show on CNN called *Crossfire* which ran from 1982 to 2005. It was cancelled because the CEO (at the time), Jonathan Klein, wanted to move away from "head butting," partisan debate shows. (Jon Stewart, as it turns out, was key in the demise of *Crossfire* because, he said, the show was hurting political discourse, a sentiment that Klein publicly agreed with.)

Christians have an opportunity to demonstrate a different way of debating. One that starts with asking questions, continues with respect for people we disagree with, and ends with getting at deeper truth.

What about debating with ourselves, questioning our own beliefs? This takes effort and it takes courage, but I think that questioning what we think is important, not only because we become better citizens, but also because we, as people of faith, grow through questions in our spiritual development. As many of you know, Presbyterians subscribe to 12 confessions of faith. These confessions outline our common beliefs, but as the Confession of 1967 says, "No one type of confession is exclusively valid, no one statement

is irreformable” (9.03). I think if any group of people in this congregation were to read through the Barmen Declaration, A Brief Statement of Faith or the Confession of Belhar, we’d have three very interesting debates. There’s probably much that people would agree on, but I think the more interesting parts of conversation - the parts that would help us grow in faith the most - would be about the things we don’t agree on ... in a spirit of mutual respect and where questions abound - all the time undergirded by the belief that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus the Christ.

In fact, let’s practice our faith and live into faithfulness now by asking questions. As we just read in Luke, Jesus went in to stay with the two from Emmaus and “when he was at table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.” Some have interpreted this passage to say that we should not make images of Jesus, that we shouldn’t fix a particular image in our minds. So what do our confessions say about this? In 1561, Heinrich Bullinger wrote a document that later became The Second Helvetic Confession. Language about God here isn’t inclusive, so feel free to change words as we read it together. But as we read, what questions come to mind about religious art? About how we should think about God? About Jesus? About the saints?

“Since God as Spirit is in essence invisible and immense, he cannot really be expressed by any art or image. For this reason we have no fear pronouncing with Scripture that images of God are mere lies. Therefore we reject not only the idols of the Gentiles, but also the images of Christians.

Although Christ assumed human nature, yet he did not on that account assume it in order to provide a model for carvers and painters. He denied that he had come “to abolish the law and the prophets.” But images are forbidden by the law and the prophets. He denied that his bodily presence would be profitable for the Church, and promised that he would be near us by his Spirit forever. Who, therefore, would believe that a shadow or likeness of his body would contribute any benefit to the pious?

And since the blessed spirits and saints in heaven, while they lived here on earth, rejected all worship of themselves and condemned images, shall anyone find it likely that the heavenly saints and angels are pleased with their own images before which men kneel, uncover their heads, and bestow other honors?” (Chapter IV, 5.020)

Legitimacy of questions? Absolutely! Questions aren’t just legitimate, not just helpful. They’re essential for getting to deeper truth and deeper faith. Thank you for being faithful with me through questions.