A Treasure Trove of Questions

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Abstract: The New Testament Made Harder is a book that collects study questions that follow the Gospel Doctrine reading schedule. The book contains very little commentary and does not provide answers to the questions posed. The main objective is not to provide information, but rather to encourage students of the New Testament to think more deeply about what they are reading. For those who are willing to put forth the effort, they will find this book to be a helpful tool in learning to analyze the scriptures more closely.

“Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers.” — Voltaire

A philosopher is that rare variety of individual who seems more interested in asking questions than in finding answers. Of course, great teachers have discovered that a love of wisdom is often best cultivated not through the mere conveyance of information but through the individual struggle for knowledge. That struggle often begins with a question. It is sometimes said that the restoration of the gospel began with a question. Indeed, it would seem that most human insight and even revelation from God starts at least with curiosity and more often still, with deep, penetrating questions. Questions often arise through the conflicts of life and through experiencing a crisis. And when we do not encounter opposition, we often do not contemplate important questions. However, an insightful philosopher can push us toward thinking more deeply about things and learning even when we are in a comfortable state of complacency. For example, how many times have we glossed over...
the scriptures in a repetitive pattern of daily reading without feeling the growth that comes during those times that we are really struggling for answers? How often have we sat contentedly in a Gospel Doctrine class without absorbing any new insight because we were neither challenged by the teacher nor by ourselves with probing questions?

In *The New Testament Made Harder*, philosophy professor James E. Faulconer confronts us with questions calculated to prod us out of our routine study of the scriptures. He explains in his introduction that good questions can force us to reconsider what we thought we already knew and lead to more questions (p. xi). He states the further goal of moving classroom discussion beyond the typical questions that we have all heard before and to which everyone in class already knows the answers into the realm of deeper contemplation (p. xiii).

*The New Testament Made Harder* is the last in a series of books that follow the four-year Gospel Doctrine study cycle and are meant as study aids for students and teachers as they prepare for Sunday lessons. These scripture study questions are part of a series of such questions that Faulconer first started posting in the *Times and Seasons* blog in 2003 and which were later re-posted in the *Feast Upon the Word* blog. For the most part, there is no material in the book that cannot also be found in the blog posts, apart from a few additions and deletions here and there. So it is clear that the author has reviewed his earlier work and has made changes.

Faulconer explained when he began posting the study questions at *Times and Seasons* that the questions came from notes he would hand out to class members in his ward covering the reading for the next week.1 He did so as a way to help members of his class to think more deeply about the upcoming material. Fortunately, he kept the practice going through all four years of the Gospel Doctrine curriculum. This final volume in the series is the culmination of that effort.

The title itself stands in playful contrast to the *Scriptures Made Easier* series, authored by David J. Ridges and published by Cedar Fort, beginning in 2004. It is appealing to us to think that we can gain great insights with little effort. My own father used to tell me, when I was showing signs of a desire to skip some hard work, that “some people want to arrive without having made the trip.” And while I have not read any of the *Scriptures Made Easier* books — they might be very good — I

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understand the inclination we all have to simply be given answers. In contrast, Faulconer wants us to struggle with the questions first.

One might ask whether the changes to the blog posts and the collection of those posts into book form make it worthwhile to purchase the book. For me, personally, it is worth it, but perhaps just barely. I have used the blog posts for years in preparing lessons. There are some things that can be done more easily with a book than with a blog post on a screen. I can jump around between pages, make notes, and leave bookmarks in a bound volume easier than I can with a blog. And, of course, a book can be used offline.

Unfortunately, the publisher has not taken full advantage of the book format. For example, there is no subject and scripture index. There is also no bibliography or works-cited section. And while there is an endnotes section, the sources cited therein are sparse. In a book of over five hundred pages, one might expect to see more than eight pages of endnotes that pertain to only about half of the chapters. In some respects, these features that would otherwise be expected are not really necessary in this book. If one wants to find questions about a particular verse, it is not too difficult to determine whether or not the verse is discussed in the main body of the text. Furthermore, there are not really very many sources that are referenced. The book overwhelmingly consists of questions, and although there is some commentary, the book itself is not really meant to be a work of commentary. At times, the author comments on the translation of the New Testament and notes that he is providing his own translation of the material when he is not referencing the King James Version. At other times, he makes occasional references to “scholars” without indicating who these scholars are. Faulconer is a tremendous scholar and a great thinker. However, it would add even more gravitas to his book if we were able to use it as a tool not only to spark thought and discussion but also to spark further research and inquiry into the scholarly works upon which this particular book depends. And, of course, there are the lingering questions regarding whether or not Professor Faulconer’s occasional representations of the “scholars” is accurate. Where there are no references, it is difficult to know.

Furthermore, in the transition from blog to book, while there are a few changes to the text here and there, it is not noticeably improved. What’s more, there are occasional typographical errors sprinkled throughout the text that could have been corrected with a bit more careful editing.
That brings us to the questions themselves. Many a student has sat in an introductory philosophy class becoming increasingly frustrated with the professor’s asking questions without revealing answers. It can seem at times that the professor is playing some kind of cat-and-mouse game, enjoying watching the students squirm under the pressure of questions about justice, truth, beauty, and art. At some point, students may become frustrated at their own inability to grasp answers to seemingly simple questions. Another danger is that the students will decide that the professor simply does not know the answers. It can seem that the professor only knows how to ask questions but cannot provide enlightenment. Readers will perhaps experience both sensations as they read Faulconer’s book. Of course, there are many times when questions lead to “ah-ha” moments and new insight is gained. That does not happen as often as one would hope. However, Faulconer seemed to anticipate this. In his introduction he suggests that in each set of questions a reader may only find “a question or two among them that you can use as foci for your lesson” (p. xii).

Of course, as Faulconer observes, we have all sat in a Gospel Doctrine class when the teacher is asking questions that no one wants to answer because they are too simple, too familiar (p. xiii). Faulconer aimed at providing a list of questions that readers typically have not considered. Some of the questions include the following:

- “Why does Mark begin with Jesus’s baptism rather than with his birth?” (p. 85)
- “What does Jesus mean when he tells the Seventy not to greet people along the way?” (p. 161)
- “Why does Jesus do so many of his miracles on the Sabbath?” (p. 183)
- “What does it mean to walk in the Spirit?” (p. 357)
- “How does the phrase ‘perfect law of liberty’ contrast with the Pharisaic understanding of the Law?” (p. 465)

As it is plain to see, these are questions that may elicit a variety of different although valid responses. They are questions that may lead to other questions and further discussion. And, of course, one can imagine a frustrated student turning to Professor Faulconer and asking, “So what are the answers to the questions?” And Professor Faulconer responding, “I don’t know. But they are interesting questions, aren’t they?”

Indeed.
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