

# What's in a Question?

A man living on a small but significant stretch of land in the Middle East was walking with a ragtag group of fellow Jews in what is now the Golan Heights. There, in the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi, surrounded by shrines dedicated to pagan gods, the man eyed his companions and asked a question, “Who do people say that I am?”<sup>1</sup> The men accompanying Jesus of Nazareth responded this way and that way before the most outspoken of the crew, a fisherman named Cephas, blurted out what he thought was the right answer to his rabbi’s question.

Christianity is a religion that raises more questions than it answers. Though theologians wax eloquent about the doctrines of the church, Christianity is a religion rooted in mystery. Its core beliefs—that God is three persons yet one nature, that Jesus is human yet divine, and that he rose from the dead three days after being murdered—begs for more explanation, more understanding, more clarity. If Christianity were a sentence, it would be followed by a question mark.

According to Socrates, an unexamined life is not worth living. The records of church history confirm this to be true. From one

1. Literally, the passages says, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” which was Jesus’ unique way of referring to himself, especially as made clear by the following verses in the passage. Other than substituting “I” for “the Son of Man,” I am using the *nrsv*. I am following the version given in Matt. 16:13–16.

perspective, the history of Christianity is nothing but a series of questions asked by people committed to a life of intense scrutiny. All generations of Christians ask their own questions as they examine their Christian identity and search for meaning in their lives. From our historical vantage point, it's quite right that Christians continually ask new questions and regularly revisit old ones. We could say that asking questions is in our religious DNA. Besides praying, serving, and believing, perhaps asking is what Christians do best. Jesus, after all, was the consummate question asker who often responded to people's questions by asking his own, suggesting to Christians nearby and far away that few things are as sacred as asking questions. During his short ministry on earth, the questions he asked were penetrating and provocative:

What are you looking for?

What will it profit [people] if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?

Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?

Why does this generation look for a sign?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?<sup>2</sup>

Taking our cue from the way that Jesus taught his disciples, this book queries whether the story of world Christianity is best told followed by a series of question marks than by semicolons, periods, or, worse yet, exclamation marks. Out of an endless array of questions from which to choose, this book will narrate the history of Christianity by responding to twenty key questions in the church's past. Each chapter begins with a story that provokes one overarching question for discussion. The remaining chapter provides responses to each question from writers of that century, with a conclusion attempting to shed light on the possible outcomes to the question

2. These questions come, respectively, from John 1:38, Matt. 16:26, Matt. 15:2, Mark 8:12, and Matt. 27:46.

posed. For the purposes of order and clarity, each chapter typically represents only one century, meaning that the twenty chapters in this book correspond to the first twenty centuries of the church. We all know, of course, that centuries are blocks of time devised by historians to serve as mental placeholders, but they also provide an agreed upon structure useful for understanding the past.

So, what were twenty questions that shaped world Christianity? Needless to say, it has not been an easy task to select only one question for each century—and the reasons why I have isolated one question over another are not unassailable. But nor are they arbitrary. It is best not to think that each chapter's framing question was *the only* question asked and debated that century, that it fully embodied the ethos of the age, or that it represented all of the vast geographic and theological sectors of the church. Naturally, no one question can exemplify an age. Nor can it epitomize a movement as globally and socially diverse as Christianity. Nonetheless, the questions isolated in each chapter do emerge from contemporary sources—even if they would not have been asked in the same exact way—and I cite in each chapter how secondary sources assume the importance of such questions for each particular century.

When reading this book, allow yourself to be drawn into the questions and responses. Imagine living in this or that century. Listen to the way contemporary writers responded in their own words to questions that we ask them today. Recognize their responses as windows into the past. Some of the questions that we formulated from contemporary concerns are long gone, suffering loss in the sands of time, while others are slowly being unearthed. Some, in fact, are as fresh today as they were centuries ago. But, at the end of the day, we must not forget that these were real people we are talking about, struggling to understand Christ in a meaningful way within their own time periods. Whether in Africa or America, Europe or

Asia, these individuals simply responded to the real-life conditions they faced—religious or otherwise. Then as today, religious issues never exist in a vacuum; they are always inextricably linked to everything else in society, and so we will survey Christian responses to a whole host of social concerns such as death, power, science, sex, slavery, and war. As we do so, we will not only learn about the past but the present as well. We will learn that our questions today are shaped by a welter of contemporary concerns, which sometimes have little to do with those of Christian communities living elsewhere in the world. How do you think your understanding of Christianity will be affected as we take this journey together? And which questions will you resonate with from the past?