

Last night was Halloween. Little children like to be scared, & scare one another, in situations of controlled fright. Adults may be bold enough to ask frightening questions if they have prospect of controlled fright.

Two local-church courses in the Old Testament have generated some bold-scary questions in prospect of my spending one session with each group to help calm their fears-frights with some light in the darkness.

QUESTIONS THAT DON'T FRIGHTEN YOU ARE LESS WORTH ASKING

1 On this sheet I'll touch on all the written questions you've submitted to me. Respond to them, touch on them, &--when it's only a matter of information--answer them. What scares me is not so much your questions as that what I say after your question marks may not be as helpful as might be. When you ask for facts, my task is easy: when you ask for truth, I stand with you under the gracious judgment of God & in the presence, in the Spirit, of the One who said "I am...the truth" (Jn.14.6). Please reread, & ponder, this Thinksheet's title.

2 I congratulate you for fighting your way back from little (ie, adult) questions to big (ie, children's) questions. How you got the humility & hope & courage to do this is hidden, even somewhat from you, in "the ground of your beseeching," in the ongoing story of your soul's journey with God. One of the joys of a Bible study-&-discussion group is that you become a little less hidden, thus a little more in communion with your fellow-members in the family of Christ, & thus a little more valiant to live out & speak out your faith in your worlds.

3 Try writing out, then writing on, what for you are the big questions. One of you wrote "I found myself in deep waters before I'd even learned to wade!" He scared himself, but (it was clear by the end of his 3-p. single-spaced paper he gave me) it felt good. SUGGESTION: Keep a commonplace book for this purpose, & get together with a few other persons occasionally to share what's been written. Yes, it's sharing your ignorance, but also your hearts....Many have found helpful this from Rilke: "The point is not to answer the [great] questions, but to live them." Maybe also these from me: (1) A great question is a love affair between a meaning & a mystery; (2) As the diameter of our knowledge increases, so does the circumference of our ignorance.

4 The Bible begins with God creating everything. **Is God necessary to explain the universe?** No; our public schools explain the universe godlessly, atheistically. Because God, loving us, wants us to love him freely, he provides for our choosing to make sense of "nature" without him. But without him, can we make sense of our longing for him--for our REACH OF SPIRIT (as in my booktitle, FLOW OF FLESH,...)? I think not. In a competition of explanations, the most inclusive one is most intelligent: it is, I think, more intelligent to believe that the One for whom we long is the Author of all longing, the "Maker of heaven and earth."

5 **If the Creator is good, why will earth end (be destroyed)?** Creation is "very good" (Gn.1.31), but finite (with beginning & end, as Bible & science agree) &--because of wayward decisions of conscious beings, angelic & human--flawed (eg, Gn.3.17: "cursed is the ground"). Only God is the Eternal (Is.57.15), but shares his "eternal life" with those who believe in "his only Son," whom God gave because he "so loved the world" (Jn.3.16).

6 **If God loves the world, why is there so much suffering in & from nature?** Consider blind-&-deaf Helen Keller: "In the world is much suffering, but also much overcoming of suffering." God's "eternal power and divine nature" are visible in creation (Ro.1.20), but not the moral majesty that appears at times in humanity, supremely in the incarnation ("we have seen his [Jesus as the Word] glory,...full of grace and truth": Jn.1.14).

7 **Isn't our human sense of morality only a projection on the universe & God?** On first thought, in light of all the mayhem "out there" in nature, the notion that the good/evil sense exists only in our species would seem more logical. But on second thought, less logical: shrinking the moral sense down to our species alone makes us an eccentric, fantastic marvel in the universe & fosters philosophical solip-

sism & sociopsychic narcissism. Further, the sense of right & wrong is too fragile to be sustainable without external supports in "the nature of things," "the way things are"--ultimately, the Source of "all things," God. Evil in nature & humanity is a mystery, but so is goodness. Finally, "God is good," goodness is not the criterion of the divine: as Job discovered, we ask God what is good, we don't tell him. Mysteriously, his holiness is both beyond, & within, what we call good/evil. The specifically Christian insight & comfort is that on the Cross, God takes the evil & sin into himself & in Jesus' Resurrection prospectively overcomes all that cripples creation, thus opening the gates of new creation.

8 **How do biblical scholars account for some of God's less desirable traits in the OT--wrath, jealousy, punishments (including genocides: "How do you reconcile a 'loving God' & the genocides He initiated on those who were simply not born Jewish?")?** "How do Christians deal with the OT God as a God of vengeance & violence?" The Bible takes on itself, as it were, the glory & burden of beginning every sentence with "God...", the One with whom the buck starts & stops. It's narrative style is *direct divine action*, a style that is paradigmatically true & powerful but pragmatically ambiguous (the divine action/character sometimes seemingly at odds with each other). God's directive will was "Exodus," deliverance from Egyptian bondage: God's permissive will explains how come Pharaoh got to enslave the Israelites in the first place. Deism is another way to look at the theodic (God-justifying) project: only rarely if ever does God intercede in the workings of the laws of consequence ("natural laws"). Again, Bonhoeffer spoke of the struggle of the bright against the dark powers: sometimes the demonic (devil, Satan, demons) gets the upper hand over the divine (good angels, God). Pictures, all: pictures (including moving pictures, stories) are all we human beings have to make sense with. I believe the biblical way of making sense is "revealed," has the special touch & approbation of heaven: I am a Christian....God in Job doesn't appear just--so how can he be called a God of justice? Justice is 1 part observation, 1 part faith (Gn.18.25: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"), & 1 part perspiration.

9 **Does "election" mean that God chose the Hebrews to be his, "the [privileged] ones," or as "the vehicle" through which he reveals himself?** We're all tempted to use only for our own advantage gifts God has given us to praise him & serve others. The chosen are chosen to be "a light to the nations" (Is.42.6): tabernacle, temple, synagogue, church, you & me. We Christians, further, see God's choice of Israel as the nation through which he himself would come, as Jesus the Lord.

10 **What was involved in the decision to include in the Bible only some of the Apocrypha?** "Canon" is the Greek word for a measuring stick: the Spirit guided the church in measuring what should be in the Bible (what "measured up") & how much. What got in was just enough to be for us an "infallible [ie, unfailing] guide to faith [what to believe] & practice [how to live]." In the Bible, "God is his own interpreter, / And he will make it plain" (as says the great hymn, "God moves in a mysterious way"). The "internal [in our hearts] testimony of the Spirit" bridges to the Spirit-inspired Scripture.

11 **How are we to think of God in relation to the universe and us?** Not pantheism (God as the universe) or panentheism (God essentially in the universe) but creationism (God as essentially, though not existentially, independent of creation) & personalism (God personal, as we are ["in his image"]). Humanity "images" God: that is the truth from below. The truth from above, ie by revelation, is that we are enough like God to make prayer/communion possible (thus, Gn.1.27: "in his image"). One of you well said "We clothe God in our image to conceal the real God": our motives in God-talk are not entirely pure. But also true is that his "image" improves as the light shines brighter till Jesus, "the image of the invisible God" (Col.1.15).

12 **If in our own congregation there is hatred of black & Jews, as we hear, what can we do to get them [the haters] to say so; & what do we say to make the situation [in our group & church] better, not worse?** People share their dark side only in situations of trust. And the dark side must speak, so (1) the community can address it & (2) the person who "comes out" can repent & be forgiven.