

Two Tricky, Awkward Questions

This was written for a community newsletter while I was pastoring a church in Edwardsville, a little town just west of Kansas City. It's fairly well dated in some respects, but its core issues and answers are timeless. I've updated the particulars for ministry here in sunny Dundalk.

You might remember the public service advertisements that called on us to ask “one simple, elegant question” when trying to make decisions. Of course, that question was, “Is it good for the kids?” At the same time, many of our kids were sporting wristbands embroidered with “W.W.J.D.?” This was to remind themselves to make decisions according to a slightly different criterion: “What would Jesus do?” Most all of us would quickly agree that those are absolutely splendid questions to bring into our decision-making processes, and that if we all routinely did so the world would be a much better place. I was thrilled with the popularity of both the ads and the bands.

Yet there are two more questions that we really ought to ask. They're not simple at all, and they're nowhere close to elegant. In fact, they are downright awkward. They are, “How do we know what's good for the kids?” and “How do we know what Jesus would do?” Are the answers to these questions really as obvious as we would think?

For example, since Jesus was something of a spiritual gadfly, always pointing out the hypocrisy of the religious establishment, should we therefore conclude that if he were alive today he'd have nothing to do with being a faithful member of a church? Some people might say so. After all, every last church in the Baltimore area has at least some hypocrites in it. Surely Jesus would have no part in them! But think again. If you read your Bible, you'll find that Jesus always criticized the establishment from within, as an integrated, cooperating, contributing member, not from without as a crank or a malcontent. It wasn't religious structure or authority he objected to; it was abusive authorities and self-serving structures.

At the other end of the spectrum, consider the fact that Jesus was a good, loyal, scrupulous Jew, routinely upholding the authority of the rabbis and priests. Does that mean that church folk should just go along with the program, without ever asking questions or seeking explanations from their leaders? Again, read your Bible. They crucified him for asking the questions he asked and pointing out the problems he pointed out.

So what would Jesus do about church? He would be a careful, conscientious, contributing member, one who asks hard questions, listens for clear answers, doesn't expect perfection but does expect honesty, and is dedicated to the success of the fellowship.

Let's think about the other question for a while: How do we know what's good for our children? The “experts” say that spanking damages a child's psyche. But God says that loving corporal punishment is an indispensable part of a comprehensive strategy for teaching good character and enforcing right behavior. Read the book of Proverbs some time. You'll find no shortage of verbal instruction there; and certainly a parent whose discipline majors on the switch, rather than on patient explanations and reminders, is indeed a parent in danger of warping his child. Yet you'll also find God saying that the person who spares the rod actually hates his child!

On the other side of the coin, though, some of us disciplinarian-types assume that “because I said so” is a good answer for us to give our kids. Living with the frustration of blind obedience will prepare them for the hard knocks of life, we reason. Yet the Bible commands parents to nurture and admonish their children, and not to exasperate them. That forces me to treat my son with respect, as a human being who deserves an honest answer to an honest question. God didn't put him in my house to be cute and be quiet; he put him here to learn and grow and blossom into a strong, smart, brave, good man. Whether he will has yet to be seen.

So what is good for the kids? What would Jesus do – about church or anything else? And how do you know if what you think is what is right?

Here's the point: if you want to make right decisions about life, make sure you know Jesus personally. Saturate yourself with his Word, the Bible. And do so in the context of faithful church membership, hearing the Word of Christ together with other people who know you, love you, and will help you do what he says. There are plenty of churches in and around Dundalk, and any one of them would be delighted to see you.

And then, for those who think the Bible is an obsolete book with nothing much to say to the twenty-first century, call me. We'll have a friendly little debate. It'll be fun! By the way, you are welcome in our churches, too. I dare you to visit one consistently for several months and see if your presuppositions measure up to reality.