

Cybercolumn by Berry D. Simpson: The biggest questions_100404

October 1, 2004

Posted: 10/01/04

CYBERCOLUMN: The biggest questions

By Berry D. Simpson

We were looking at the Bible story about when Jesus, as a 12-year-old boy, got “lost” from his parents and spent three days in the Jerusalem temple in deep discussions with the temple leaders and teachers (Luke 2:42-52).

I’ve often wondered where Jesus slept while he stayed in Jerusalem? Didn’t those wise teachers think that his parents might be worried? Were they so full of themselves it never occurred to them to wonder whether this boy had a family who missed him?

It’s my guess that the conversation started out as a simple question from a young boy to one of the teachers, and that one question blossomed into a long conversation that pulled in other teachers one by one. I imagine the topics bounced all around the law and prophecies and worship and ethical living and God’s will, freewheeling like great conversations do.

Berry D. Simpson

Like when my friend Bear and I start mumbling about our upcoming lessons and how we plan to make our points and soon the conversation travels all over the map as we try out new ideas on each other and make jokes and bait each other and all that. In a conversation like that, it can become evident very quickly if you are talking to someone who is wise beyond their years, smarter than average, which is exactly what those teachers in the temple recognized in the 12-year-old Jesus.

So the question I posed to my friends in Bible study was this: If you had time to spend with the smartest people in the world, and you knew nothing you said or asked would be considered silly or stupid, what would you ask? What would you talk about?

Well, that was too broad a question. The smartest people in the world might be smart in a topic that's totally baffling. Like Bose-Einstein Condensation, or fourth-century Eastern European literature, and who would know what questions to ask? So I got more specific: Imagine you have time with the smartest theologian and Bible teacher, what would be your question? What would you want to discuss?

This was easier and more to the point of the story in Luke. I got a lot of good responses, such as: I would ask, What is heaven like? I'd ask about my own free will and why God made it easy for me to make bad choices. I'd ask about the difference between being filled with the Holy Spirit and being controlled by the Holy Spirit. I'd ask about my career and if I could serve God better if made a change.

Of course, some people tried to turn my question back and ask me how I would respond, but I dodged their attempts. I wasn't sure how to answer. I was afraid as a teacher myself I was under pressure to think up the most insightful question, and I didn't have a clue what to ask.

I realized later, however, that in fact, I have actually had several

opportunities to be around a man, a minister and friend, who is the smartest individual I will ever know. And I've had many, though not enough, discussions with him about important things. I've heard my friend teach classes on heaven and free will and pain and suffering and the Holy Spirit, and so I have little more to ask about those topics. Not that I know or understand all he was saying, but I have already absorbed all my limited brain cells can contain on those issues, so why ask more?

The last couple of times we've talked, counting e-mail exchanges, I've asked him: What are you reading nowadays? What is new in your church? What is next for you? What are you thinking about most? I want to know the thoughts that fill his mind so maybe I can fill mine with the same thoughts.

It turns out I wasn't so interested in knowing what the smartest guy in the world knows; I was more interested in how he thinks and what he considers important. I don't want to know what he knows as much as I want to be who he is.

It's a subtle difference—acquiring knowledge versus developing character—and it is, I think, a recent phenomenon in my life.

I believe I've changed motivations in response to a Thursday morning men's study group at my church where we've been engaged more in character development than learning new facts; more about who we are than what we know. It may be subtle, but it is important.

Erwin McManus says, "The shape of your character is the shape of your future."

I plan for my future to be full of questions, and I hope they can be big ones.

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