

Welcome interruption: Letting the Bible question us

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

In a famous 1936 lecture, “The Presentation of New Testament Texts,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer proposed to the Confessing Church an alternative strategy of reading scripture. Instead of questioning the Bible from their standpoint, as the German Christians were doing, Bonhoeffer challenged them to let the Bible question them.

This advice became extraordinarily powerful in Bonhoeffer’s own life, for in his reading of scripture he discovered a reality that had been occluded in his own upbringing and in the German Christian church: the significance of the Old Testament and the people Israel. He discovered that scripture was questioning him and the people of Nazi Germany in their treatment of Jews, and this discovery led him to new patterns of thought and action. In particular, it led Bonhoeffer to write that “only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants.”

The challenge to “allow scripture to question us” is also important for our own day—I have noticed how regularly I read scripture with my own interests in mind. At times this is rather prosaic, as when I read simply with the interests of writing a sermon or preparing a lecture or getting ready for a Bible study. But at other times it is more perverse.

For example, I regularly turn to the Book of Job to think about God and problems of evil. I focus largely on chapters 1-2 and 38-42, because I have specific interests in mind. For many years, however, I did not notice that the speeches in chapters 3-37 have a lot to say about poverty, and about God’s love for the poor. I didn’t read in a way that opened me to vulnerability and surprise, that would put me and my assumptions in question. We all face this temptation of becoming so preoccupied with our own interests that we find it difficult to open ourselves to how God might question us.

We find similar patterns in our struggles with prayer, with forgiveness, with strangers. Too often we let our prayers focus on what I want or need, rather than

genuinely listening for a word that God might speak. What would it mean to listen for God so patiently and quietly over time that we might genuinely conclude at the end of a council, “It has seemed good to the Spirit, and to us . . .” (Acts 15:28)?

Forgiveness is a hauntingly difficult subject to tackle, especially given our blood-drenched histories. It is no less difficult as we grapple with the pains of interpersonal brokenness and the challenges of reconciliation. But I have noticed in my own life, and in seminars and workshops on forgiveness, a recurring phenomenon: we immediately think about the challenge of learning to forgive rather than learning to be forgiven. The former, difficult though it may be, continues to leave me as the central person with questions to put to others. Learning to be forgiven requires that I be the one put in question, for then it is a matter of self-examination and reflection.

We often try to find ways to avoid encountering strangers, because they are notorious for asking us questions, some of them awkward ones. When we do encounter strangers, we try to keep some distance, as if we must keep our position and identity secure.

That is, until we encounter God in the three great festivals of the church year: Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. In each of these festivals we encounter a stranger whom we cannot control: God incarnate in a baby, a traveler on the road to Emmaus, and the wind of the Spirit. We are put in question by these strange, life-giving ways in which God becomes present to us.

How do we learn to make these festivals central to the ways in which we read scripture, pray without ceasing, discover forgiveness, encounter strangers? How do we learn to bear faithful witness to the God who interrupts our lives and puts us in question for the sake of a life that really is life?

Part of the solution is in developing intentional strategies. For example, I need to learn to read scripture in ways that put me in question—especially by discovering how others read similar texts. I learned, for example, to see new passages in Job after reading Gustavo Gutiérrez’s book *On Job*. In addition, the practice of intercessory prayer is powerful in teaching me to pray not for myself but for others. Some of the most powerful praying I have done recently has been when I listen for God’s voice in my concern for a woman who is struggling with cancer.

Some of these strategies involve relationships—discovering holy friendships in which I learn how to trust and listen to others who are gifted at challenging the sins I have

come to love, at affirming the gifts I am afraid to claim, and at helping me dream dreams I otherwise would not dream. These friends help me learn what it means to be forgiven and how to live a more faithful life. They also teach me how to become vulnerable to interruption from strangers or those from whom I have become estranged, recognizing that I may be entertaining angels unaware. Indeed, holy friendships develop only when we risk letting ourselves be questioned by strangers.

In all of these ways, we are shaping habits and dispositions that will put us in question in life-giving ways. As we approach the celebration of Pentecost and the bewildering yet life-giving power of the Holy Spirit, I hope for something more than a day-long celebration. I hope to renew my commitment to patterns that will challenge me and my assumptions so that I can discover afresh the power of God in everyday practices and relationships.