

How to Ask Good Questions/Critical Thinking

MTC 2

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Questions and Critical Thinking.

The mind is a critical organ. Both the heart (feelings) and hands (actions) are affected critically by our minds (thoughts).

“The quality of our lives is determined by the quality of our thoughts. To think well is to live well.” - What do you think of that statement? What are the questions you need to ask about it? E.g. What does ‘quality’ mean here? Is it true?

Certainly the quality of our thoughts is determined by the quality of questions we ask. To ask good questions is to think well.¹

Unfortunately our Kenyan culture discourages questioning – especially a young person to an older. And generally, questions are not welcomed and not encouraged. Our education system emphasizes memorization of content rather than critical thinking about the meaning and the principle(s) behind the content.²

We forget that all statements are answers to implicit questions and that thinking is not driven by answers but questions.

But questions are good—no – crucial to critical thinking and living. We see the Bible using

¹ Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*, Nelson: 1985, p. 103: “Learn to ask questions.” John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God*, Crossway, p. 48: “Asking questions is the key to understanding”.

² John Piper, *Think*, p. 48 “Schooling is not the same as education.” MacDonald (*Ordering*, p. 93, 97) similarly points out there is a difference between gathering facts and rules and deep, insightful thinking and learning.

questions throughout OT and NT. God asks questions—he is not only the creator of the inquisitive mind but the first questioner.

* Where are you? (Genesis 3:6)

The Bible is a book of questions (and all the answers we need too)

All subject areas are developed (and sustained) by quality questions asked about the unknown aspects of the subject.

There is need for our culture to learn to think well by learning to ask good questions.

* Compare the development in cultures that encourages questions (and hence critical thinking) with ours...

How?

1. Start with love. [The heart leads the head](#). If you are loving rightly you can think rightly. “It is impossible for [the mind set on the flesh] to think objectively because; a) it will always be thinking ‘What’s in it for me?’ and trying to rationalise this; and, b) it is hostile to God (Rom. 8.7). By contrast... [the mind] set on what the Spirit desires... is free to explore what is best for God and the common good... being released from the defensiveness and nervousness of self-interest”³
2. Be humble... Don't fear being seen as a fool⁴ (but don't ask foolish questions!)⁵
3. For every argument/statement, seek to know its reason, and evidence.
4. Identify and interrogate the ‘Elements of thought’:
 - What is the purpose of my thinking?
 - What precise question am I trying to answer?

³ Tim Saunders, ‘Atheist Mind / Christian Mind’, *Evangelicals Now*, May 2015.

⁴ “The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know” (1 Cor. 8:2). “As our circle of knowledge expands, so does the circumference of darkness surrounding it.” (Albert Einstein).

⁵ What we need is “Humble questioning that expresses eagerness to grow and to uncover truth” (Piper, *Think*, p. 50) not displaying our cleverness or trying to trip people up or score points.

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- Within what point of view am I thinking?
 - What information am I using?
 - How am I interpreting that information?
 - What concepts or ideas are central to my thinking?
 - What conclusions am I coming to?
 - What am I taking for granted, what assumptions am I making?
 - If I accept the conclusions, what are the implications?
 - What would the consequences be, if I put my thought into action?⁶
5. Next, consider precision (specific details of the information, untrue or vague), consistency (examine contradictions), accuracy (test truth and correctness) and logic (reasonableness of thoughts and whether they follow from one another).
6. Finally, watch out for fallacies. E.g.:
- 1) The conclusion doesn't follow from the premise – “All dogs have four legs. This animal has four legs. Therefore this animal is a dog.”
 - a. Causation is *assumed* not proven – “The pope came, the economy improved, therefore the pope improved the economy”
 - b. Clustering effect – “There have been 10 cases of cancer in this village so there must be witchcraft or polluted water or poisoning” – may be random cluster of data
 - c. Slippery slope argument - “If we start to try to help someone we will have to help everyone and get distracted from our main work”
 - d. Appeal to results/consequences – “I believed this and it has worked for me so it must be right” or “If we don't go along with this we will be in big trouble”
 - e. Appeal to character – “This book is published by bad people therefore it's wrong”
 - f. Appeal to popularity – “Millions of people believe this so it must be true”
 - g. Stereotyping and generalising from anecdotal evidence – “Americans are liars, I know that because I met an American and he lied to me”
 - 2) False premise or assumed premise – “The laws of nature cannot be violated therefore miracles cannot happen”
 - a. Complex question – “Have you stopped beating your wife?”
 - b. False dilemma – “Either God is all powerful or God is all loving”
 - c. No smoke without fire – “I heard that the CIA planned 9/11” – but maybe the smoke (the rumour) is not actually smoke (something evidencing a fire)
 - d. Straw man – “Arminians believe you have to save yourself” or “Calvanists believe we are robots controlled by God”
 - 3) Pure assertion or appeal to emotion – “Give me an amen!” or “That is a horrible thing to say!” or “In my personal opinion”

⁶ Source: <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/critical-thinking-identifying-the-targets/486>. These questions can be used of your own thinking or to interrogate someone else's argument.



The mind is like a muscle: you use it, it grows. You don't, it atrophies.⁷

Force your mind to think. This is the way to lifelong learning.

Other areas of life that critical thinking and questions are very helpful in:

A. Relationships

Relationships grow and deepen through “sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personalistic self-disclosure”⁸

Interested, open questions that help someone to reveal something of themselves – not prying but polite, sensitive, warm, humble and loving

- Facts
- Opinions
- Feelings



B. Evangelism

- Find out where someone is
- Help them see what they believe and the implications of what they believe

What are you talking about? What do you think is the problem with the world? What are you hoping for? What do you love most about your god? Why don't you go to church? Do you know what will happen to you when you die?

C. Bible Study

Love the Lord your God with all your mind. Ask as many questions as you possibly can of a passage:

- What? Who? Why? When? How? Where?
 - What am I learning about God?
 - What am I learning about man?
- What do I not understand? Write down all the questions you have – answered and unanswered.
- Read the passage with other people – especially children – and see what questions they ask.
- Have a project as you read the Bible – e.g. What is faith and what is the relationship between faith and good works?

D. Discernment online

Social media, search engines, unsolicited email – always think critically:

1. What? Check the content – spelling and punctuation and presentation – is this credible as a source or an official communication?
2. Who? Is author provided? What credentials? Where are they coming from (in thought)?

⁷ MacDonald *Ordering*, p. 92: “all training is painful and frustrating on the way to skills that later become second nature and lead to greater joy... Embrace the pain of learning.” J. Gresham Machen quoted in Piper, *Think*, p. 40: “the mind must be pushed, filled, stretched, and forced in order to function.”

⁸ [Arthur Aaron, 'The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.](#)

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3. Who? Is publisher provided? (e.g. which news site or blog?) Are they reliable? What is their normal agenda/perspective?
 4. When? Is a date provided? (e.g. “IS attacking village and killing Christians” may actually be a report from two years ago)
 5. Where was it written? (e.g. “If you see child with address round neck don’t go to address” – must be from a country which has home postal addresses)
 6. Check the sources – i.e. the original publisher (e.g. with Whatsapp message – did CNN or Department of Education or Cancer Research *really* issue this statement?) or the cited supporting evidence – is there any, does it actually exist, is it credible, does it support?
 7. Be aware of our own biases – esp. confirmation bias – we want to hear our views confirmed

Most of all, [check the gospel](#) which is being proclaimed:

1. How am I saved?
2. What am I saved from?
3. What am I saved for?

Critical thinking—thinking through our thoughts, feelings and actions—is crucial in life.

I plead with you (us) to think critically.

Resources:

- [Jinsi ya: Kuuliza maswali vyema](#)
- [How to write your Research \(Joy\) Paper](#)
- [John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God*](#)
- [Website Evaluation Guide, Easy Bib](#)
- [10 warning signs that something on the internet is crackers](#)
- [Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*](#)
- [Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism*](#)
- [David Murray on 20 Cognitive Biases](#)
- [Michael Ramsden on Logic and Fallacies](#)
- [The plague of hoax warning messages and what’s behind it](#)