

X-ray Questions: Drawing Out the Whys and Wherefores of Human Behavior

by David Powlison

“Why did I do that?”

Why *do* you react that way? Use those words and that tone of voice? Think those things? Feel this way? Remember that particular facet of what happened? Make that choice in this situation? Anticipate those possible outcomes?

The question WHY? launches a thousand theories of human nature. Why do people do what they do? An “answer” to this question anchors each analysis of human personality, and every attempt to fix what ails the human race. A view of motivation aligns and colors every detail of theory and practice. Did you become fixated somewhere on the hierarchy of need? Are you genetically hardwired towards aggression? Are raging hormones the culprit? Do your instinctual psychic impulses conflict with the dictates of society? Have your drives been reinforced by rewarding stimuli? Are you an Aries with Jupiter rising? Are you an Adult Child of unhappy and determinative traumatic experience? Are you compensating for perceived inferiorities, seeking to acquire better self-esteem? Did a demon named Addiction infiltrate a crevice in your personality? Did you have a failure of willpower? Are you ignorant of good doctrine? Are you temperamentally a melancholic or a sanguine, pessimist or optimist, introvert or extrovert? Are you immersed in the ideological false consciousness that characterizes your social class? Does your self-talk misrepresent the bases for identity and self-worth? “I did that, thought that, felt that *because....*” What meets the eye has reasons.

Theories of what makes people tick incarnate into counseling models. Explanations are signposts to solutions: take medication, experience reparenting, cast out a demon, get your needs met, don’t make big decisions on bad star days, reprogram your inner monologue, explore your pain. Presumed reasons and appropriate responses are fiercely debated. In any university library, hundreds of yards of library shelves collect and collate the debates. The Lord God has a great deal to say on the issue, weighing in with His own point of view. He vigorously rebuts the contenders and counterfeits by demonstrating that human motivation has to do with *Him*. Counseling that aims to arise from Scripture must do justice to what God says about the whys and wherefores of the human heart. Scripture claims to search out the “thoughts and intentions of the heart” according to the specific criteria by which the Searcher of hearts evaluates what He sees in us (Heb 4:12f).

The following list of “X-ray questions” provides aid in discerning the patterns of a person’s motivation. The questions aim to help people identify and unveil the ungodly masters that occupy positions of authority in their hearts. These questions reveal “functional gods,” what or who actually controls particular actions, thoughts, emotions, attitudes, memories, and anticipations. Note well, “functional gods” in a particular situation often stand diametrically opposed to the “professed God.”

Consider when you become anxious, preoccupied, and filled with fretful concern. Something happened—you can’t get it off your mind. Something is happening now—you’re consumed with it. Something will happen tomorrow—your mind turns it over and over, chewing on every possible

contingency. As the sin of worry tightens its unpleasant hold on your soul, perhaps you jump for some escapist quick fix: raid the icebox, watch TV, masturbate, read a novel, go shopping, drink a beer, play a game. Or perhaps you mobilize to seize control: make a string of phone calls, work all night, build a faction of supporters, clean your house, get mad. Why is all this going on?

As a Christian you *profess* that God controls all things, and works everything to His glory and your ultimate well-being. You profess that God is your rock and refuge, a very present help in whatever troubles you face. You profess to worship Him, trust Him, love Him, obey Him. But in that moment—hour, day, season—of anxiety, escape, or drivenness, you live as if *you* needed to control all things. You live as if money, or someone’s approval, or a “successful” sermon, or your grade on an exam, or good health, or avoiding conflict, or getting your way, or ... matters more than trusting and loving God. You live as if some temporary good feeling could provide you refuge, as if your actions could make the world right. Your functional god competes with your professed God. Unbelievers are wholly owned by ungodly motives. True believers are often severely compromised, distracted, and divided. But grace reorients us, purifies us, and turns us back to our Lord.

Christ’s transformational work in our lives simultaneously operates in two dimensions, the “vertical” and “horizontal,” the Why and the How. God is always reorienting both our worship and our walk, our motives and our lifestyle. Paul summarizes the purpose of his ministry this way: “The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5). Love summarizes the renovation of horizontal relationships. Pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith capture the reconfiguration of vertical relationship. An impure or double-minded heart serves multiple masters. A bad or distorted conscience misinterprets, misguides, and misevaluates, failing to process life God’s way. A hypocritical faith professes, sings, and prays one way, but trusts something else when push comes to shove. Defections of heart, conscience, and faith produce particular sins. Restoration of heart, conscience, and faith produces particular obediences. This article will probe the vertical dimension that guides and animates—*causes*—the horizontal dimension.

Notice that each question circles around the same basic issue: Who or what is your functional God/god? Many of the questions simply derive from the *verbs* that relate you to God: love, trust, fear, hope, seek, obey, take refuge, and the like. Each verb holds out a lamp to guide us to Him who is way, truth, and life. But each verb also may be turned into a question, holding up a mirror to show us where we stray. Each question comes at the same general question. In individual situations—different times, places, people—one or another may be more appropriate and helpful. Different ways of formulating the motivation question will ring the bells of different people.

The questions that follow are “Why?” questions, framed concretely as “What?” questions. These questions can help you draw out what gives specific direction to a person’s life. You do not see into anyone’s heart, but you can make intelligent inquiry into “Why are you angry? Why do you manipulate him? Why are you anxious in that situation? Why do you have a problem of lust at that particular time? Why do you drink to excess?” The Bible—the penetrating and light-giving word of the Searcher of hearts—is concerned to pierce below behaviors and emotions in order to expose motives, to lay people bare before Him with whom we have to do. Reorienting motives through the grace of the gospel can follow when there is conviction of particular forms of disorientation.

These questions can be used in several different ways. Each can be focused “microscopically,” to dissect the details of one particular incident in a person’s life. Or each can be focused to give a “wide-angle” panoramic view, to illuminate recurrent and typical patterns that characterize a

person's entire life. You will find in the course of counseling—and your own growth in grace—that the details and the panorama complement each other. The panorama alone is too general; change happens in specifics. The details alone seem trivial; the panorama gives large meaning to such tiny details.

The Bible references are meant to be pump primers to get you thinking. They barely scratch the surface of the Bible's treatment of what motivates people. Be sure to ask the questions first "existentially." What *is* motivating you or another? Do not run to the "Christian right answer" without working hard and honestly to analyze deviant "functional gods." Intelligent repentance will make the right answers really right and will make the love of Jesus your joy and hope.

1. What do you love? Hate?

This "first great commandment" question searches you out heart, soul, mind and might. There is no deeper question to ask of any person at any time. There is no deeper explanation for why you do what you do. Disordered loves hijack our hearts from our rightful Lord and Father.

2. What do you want, desire, crave, lust, and wish for? What desires do you serve and obey?

This summarizes the internal operations of the desire-driven "flesh" in the New Testament epistles. "My will be done" and "I want—" are often quite accessible. Various desires rule people, so go for details of *this* person, *now*, in *this* situation. Notice, sometimes another person's will rules you (peer pressure, people-pleasing, slave-like, or chameleon behavior). In such cases, your heart's craving is to get whatever good they promise and avoid whatever bad they threaten: "I crave to be included, appreciated, accepted, admired by you."

3. What do you seek, aim for, pursue? What are your goals and expectations?

This particularly captures that your life is active and moves in a direction. We are purpose-full. Human motivation is not passive, as if hard-wired needs, instincts, or drives were controlled from outside us by being "unmet," "frustrated," or "conditioned." People are active verbs.

4. Where do you bank your hopes?

The future dimension is prominent in God's interpretation of human motives. People energetically sacrifice to attain what they hope for. What is it? People in despair have had hopes dashed. What were those shattered hopes?

5. What do you fear? What do you not want? What do you tend to worry about?

Sinful fears invert cravings. If I want to avoid something at all costs—loss of reputation, loss of control, poverty, ill health, rejection, etc.—I am ruled by a lustful fear.

6. What do you feel like doing?

This is street talk for question 2, what do you desire? To be "feeling-oriented" means to make your wants your guide: "I feel like cursing you. I don't feel like doing my chores."

7. What do you think you need? What are your "felt needs"?

Questions 2 and 3 exposed your aims in terms of activity and pursuit. This question exposes your aims in terms of what you hope to receive, get, and keep. Felt needs are frequently taken as self-evident necessities to be acquired, not as deceptive slave-masters. Our culture of need reinforces the flesh's instincts and habits. In most cases, a person's felt needs are street talk for idolatrous demands for love, understanding, a sense of being in control, affirmation, and achievement.

8. What are your plans, agendas, strategies, and intentions designed to accomplish?

This is another way to size up what you are after. The egocentricity lurking within even the most noble-sounding plans can be appalling. No one ever asserts, "The expansion of our church into a mega-church will get me fame, wealth, and power," but such motives are garden-variety

human nature. Their presence, even covertly, will pervert and stain one's actions to some degree or other.

9. What makes you tick? What sun does your planet revolve around? Where do you find your garden of delight? What lights up your world? What fountain of life, hope, and delight do you drink from? What food sustains your life? What really matters to you? What fairy castle do you construct in the clouds? What pipe dreams tantalize or terrify you? Around what do you organize your life? What magnetic north orients your world?

Many gripping metaphors can express the question, "What are you really living for?" Notice that to be ruled, say, by deep thirsts for intimacy, achievement, respect, health, or wealth does not define these as legitimate, unproblematic desires. They function perversely, placing ourselves at the center of the universe. We are meant to long supremely for the Lord Himself, for the Giver, not His gifts. The absence of blessings—rejection, vanity, reviling, illness, poverty—often is the crucible in which we learn to love God for God. In our idolatry we instate gifts as supreme goods, and make the Giver into the errand boy of wandering desires.

10. Where do you find refuge, safety, comfort, escape, pleasure, security?

This is the Psalms' question, digging out your false trusts, your escapisms that substitute for the Lord. Many of the "addictive behaviors" are helpfully addressed by this question. They often arise in the context of life's troubles and pressures, and function as false refuges.

11. What or who do you trust?

Trust is one of the major verbs relating you to God—or to false gods and lies. Crucial Psalms breathe trust in our Father and Shepherd. Where instead do you place life-directing, life-anchoring trust? In other people? In your abilities or achievements? In your church or theological tradition? In possessions? In diet, exercise, and medical care?

12. Whose performance matters? On whose shoulders does the well-being of your world rest? Who can make it better, make it work, make it safe, make it successful?

This digs out self-righteousness, or living through your children, or pinning hopes on getting the right kind of husband or wife, and so forth.

13. Who must you please? Whose opinion of you counts? From whom do you desire approval and fear rejection? Whose value system do you measure yourself against? In whose eyes are you living? Whose love and approval do you need?

When you lose God, you enter a jungle of distortion. You tend to live before your own eyes or before the eyes of others—or both. The "social idols" take numerous particular forms: acceptance or rejection, being included or excluded, approval or criticism, affection or hostility, adoration or belittlement, intimacy or alienation, being understood or caricatured.

14. Who are your role models? What kind of person do you think you ought to be or want to be?

Your "idol" or "hero" reveals you. Such persons embody the "image" towards which you aspire.

15. On your deathbed, what would sum up your life as worthwhile? What gives your life meaning?

This is Ecclesiastes' question. That book examines scores of options—and finds all but one option ultimately futile. At some point, translate Ecclesiastes 2 into its modern equivalents!

16. How do you define and weigh success or failure, right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, in any particular situation?

The standards that you serve and employ may be wildly distorted. God intends to renew your “conscience,” that by which you evaluate yourself and others. If you approach life “in your own understanding” or “in your own eyes,” you will live as a fool.

17. What would make you feel rich, secure, prosperous? What must you get to make life sing?

The Bible often uses the metaphor of treasure or inheritance to speak of motivation.

18. What would bring you the greatest pleasure, happiness and delight? The greatest pain and misery?

Blessedness and accursedness are the Bible’s way of discussing happiness and woe. What calculation do you make about where and how to find blessing? Your calculation reveals what you live for.

19. Whose coming into political power would make everything better?

This used to be less true of Americans than of many other nations, where politics is a major locus of idolatrous hopes. But as cultural consensus breaks down, many people increasingly invest hopes in political power.

20. Whose victory or success would make your life happy? How do you define victory and success?

How does inertial self-interest reveal itself? Some people “live and die” based on the performance of a local sports team, the financial bottom line of their company, their Grade Point Average, or their physical appearance.

21. What do you see as your rights? What do you feel entitled to?

This question often nicely illuminates the motivational pattern of angry, aggrieved, self-righteous, self-pitying people. Our culture of entitlement reinforces the flesh’s instincts and habits. “I deserve——”?

22. In what situations do you feel pressured or tense? Confident and relaxed? When you are pressured, where do you turn? What do you think about? What are your escapes? What do you escape from?

This question comes at matters from a slightly different direction. Many times certain patterns of sin are situation-dependent. Teasing out the significant aspects of the situation can hold up a mirror to the heart’s motives. When public speaking “makes you” tense, perhaps your heart is ruled by your own performance in the eyes of others (fear of man and pride). When paying bills generates anxiety, perhaps a strand of mammon-worship operates within you.

23. What do you want to get out of life? What payoff do you seek out of the things you do? “What do you get out of doing that?”

This is a concrete way to restate questions 3 and 8, digging out your operative goals. Idols, lies, and cravings *promise* goodies. Serve Baal, and he’ll give you fertility. Get that cute guy to like you, and you’ll feel good about yourself. Make \$100,000, and you’ll show up those people who thought you’d never make it in life.

24. What do you pray for?

Your prayers often reveal the pattern of your imbalance and self-centeredness. Of the many possible things to ask for, what do you concentrate on? Prayer is about desire; we ask for what we want. Do your prayers reflect the desires of God or of the flesh?

25. What do you think about most often? What preoccupies or obsesses you? In the morning, to what does your mind drift instinctively? What is your “mindset”?

Hold up a mirror to your drift, that you might reset your course!

26. What do you talk about? What is important to you? What attitudes do you communicate?

This question and the next presume the closest possible connection between motives and behavior. Notice both what people choose to talk about and how they say it. Our words proclaim what our hearts worship.

27. How do you spend your time? What are your priorities?

Notice what you and others choose to do. It is a signpost to the heart's operative loyalties.

28. What are your characteristic fantasies, either pleasurable or fearful? Daydreams? What do your night dreams revolve around?

We are still responsible human beings even when more or less detached from consciousness. Your patterns of concern and desire are revealed in reverie.

29. What are the functional beliefs that control how you interpret your life and determine how you act?

Hebrews 4:12 speaks of the “thoughts and intentions” of the heart. Perhaps we could translate this “beliefs and desires.” Both the lies you believe and the lusts you pursue undergird visible sins. A person’s functional, operative beliefs control responses. The ways you understand God, yourself, others, the devil, right and wrong, true and false, past, present, future … have pervasive effects.

30. What are your idols or false gods? In what do you place your trust, or set your hopes? What do you turn to or seek? Where do you take refuge? Who is the savior, judge, controller, provider, protector in your world? Who do you serve? What “voice” controls you?

This entire list of 35 questions pursues things that usurp God. Each of these can metaphorically be termed an “idol” to which you give loyalty. The voices you listen to mimic specific characteristics of God. Start to trace that out into the details of life lived, and your ability to address the vertical dimension relevantly and specifically will mature.

31. How do you live for yourself?

This is a general way of asking any of these questions. “Self” takes a thousand shapes and wears a thousand disguises.

32. How do you live as a slave of the devil?

Human motivation is not purely “psychological,” “psychosocial,” or “psychosocialsomatic.” When you serve lusts and lies, you serve a personal enemy who wishes to deceive, enslave, and murder you. Human motivation is thoroughly “covenantal.” You may serve the devil, or you may serve the Lord, but you’re going to have to serve somebody, as Bob Dylan put it.

33. How do you implicitly say, “If only....” (to get what you want, avoid what you don’t want, keep what you have)?

The “If onlys” are street talk that can uncover many motivational themes in the interest of creating biblical self-understanding and repentance.

34. What instinctively seems and feels right to you? What are your opinions, things you feel are true?

You not only “feel like” doing some things (question 6 above), you also “feel that” certain things are true. On the contrary, wisdom is correctable, as it listens and learns.

35. Where do you find your identity? How do you define who you are?

The Bible says radical things about self-knowledge, identity, and the categories of self-evaluation (“conscience”). The places people typically look for identity are dry wells.

This sampler of questions will get you thinking fruitfully about how human life is exhaustively God-relational. Let me reinforce three points that I have found particularly helpful in keeping my

compass bearings, both in counseling and in seeking to repent of my own sins. First, my rule-of-thumb is a twofold question: *What lies and lusts are being expressed through this sinful pattern of life?* Dig under irritability, selfishness, hopelessness, escapism, self-righteousness, self-pity, crippling fears, complaining—whatever—and you will find a mosaic of specific lies believed and cravings pursued. Scripture equips you to get at them, to draw them into the light.

Second, *the verbs that relate people to God must become an active part of your thinking.* People are *always* doing something with God. Human beings inescapably love God—or love something else. We take refuge in God—or in something else. We set our hopes in God—or in something else. We fear God—or something else. Scripture will come to life in new ways as you develop an alertness to how the man-before-God verbs play out in real life. Such perspective grants powerful insights both for evangelistic counseling and for helping the saints grow.

Third, *by seeing the God-relatedness of all motivation, you see that what is wrong with us calls for a God-related solution: the grace, peace, power, and presence of Jesus Christ.* Human motivation is about the vertical dimension. The good news of Christ is no add-on, no religiously-toned way to meet pre-existent desires and needs. Living faith in Jesus Christ is the only sane motivation, the radical alternative to a thousand forms of deviance.

Sanctification aims to purify both heart and members, to change both motives and behavior. Both matter. Imagine sitting on a hill overlooking a lake. You watch a powerboat speed across the water. You see and hear its “behavior”: it accelerates from the dock, makes a wide turn, bounces over another wake at high speed, suddenly cuts its motor, ghosts into the shallows by an islet, splashes an anchor overboard. Why did it behave in that way? If you were able to zoom in, you would find out about its “motives.” You would find what powered and directed the boat: a 200 horsepower inboard V-8 motor, a rudder and steering wheel, the thoughts and intentions of the pilot. Why did the boat go to the island? To find buried treasure? Escape from the police? Take the family for a picnic? Test drive the boat for possible purchase? Flag down a passerby because it ran out of gas? To fully understand and “help” the powerboat, you must converse about both the visible and the invisible, both behavior and motive. The Bible gets at both results and reasons. To evaluate and “counsel” the powerboat, you need to pursue all that can be known.

The Knower of *hearts* will recompense each person according to his *deeds* (Jeremiah 17:10). Scripture never bifurcates motive and behavior. The mirror of Scripture exposes both. The lamp of Scripture guides both. The grace and power of Jesus Christ change both root and fruit. The “first great commandment” addresses motivational roots: Do you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? Or does something else divide and steal your affections? The “second great commandment” addresses behavioral fruits: Do you love your neighbor as yourself? Or do you misuse, bully, fear, avoid, hate, ignore your neighbor? The gospel of Jesus Christ bridges from darkness to light. Grace takes out of us the heart of stone, teaching us to know God; grace replaces the hands and tongue that work evils, teaching us to live more beautiful lives.

Any of these 35 questions can be asked directly of a person in this or an appropriately altered form. But they are not always questions to ask directly. Sometimes it is better simply to listen and observe, combing through the fruit in a person’s life for the patterns that might indicate the heart’s functional commitments. I remember noticing how a man I counseled would apologize profusely, with evident agitation and distress, each time he arrived a few minutes late. These little bits “fit” with other pieces of the puzzle that hadn’t quite taken shape yet in our counseling conversation. As it turned out, he was late because he couldn’t break off from other people, from phone calls or visitors, for fear they would not like him. He apologized profusely to me because he was afraid that I would not like him. He had very few true peers, but either idealized superior beings or

contemned inferior creatures. Those small bits of fruit—the reasons for lateness, momentary agitation, inordinate apology, polarized view of others—led us into the pattern that mastered his life: people too big and God too small (Prov 29:25). That interweaving of pride and fear of man is a primary disorder in our disordered hearts. And that directed us straight to the trustworthy Jesus Christ. Explanations are signposts to solutions. This man found forgiveness and the power to trust a new Master. He learned to walk out practical changes. Rather than cowering or towering, he began to love people with increasing realism and tenderness as he grew to see others as essentially no different from himself.

Let me close with a final case study. I once counseled a man who habitually escaped life's pressures into TV, food, video games, alcohol, pornography, antique collecting, sci-fi novels, working out at the gym. He neglected loving his wife and children; he was slack about his job; he was evasive and deceitful in his communication to others; he went through the motions in church. Where to begin? There were so many problems, so many sins of both commission and omission. How could I focus his problems? I wasn't sure what to pick up on. Then it struck me: Try the Psalms—as a whole! Almost every single Psalm, in some way or other, portrays the Lord as our refuge in trouble, as the center of our hopes. The Psalms implicitly and explicitly rebuke taking refuge in anything less; the Psalms offer steadfast love and mercy; the Psalms spur us to know and obey God in the trenches of life. This man felt vaguely guilty for some of his bad behavior. But he didn't see the pattern or the seriousness of what he lived for. He craved ease, control, comfort—and expressed his craving in dozens of ways. His efforts at change were half-baked and unsuccessful. Conviction of the specific sin of his heart—turning from the living God in order to seek idolatrous refuge—woke him up, and made him see his behavioral sins in a fresh way. His need for what God offered—grace upon grace, for a life of faith working through love—began to burn inside him. As the lights came on about his patterns, he even began to identify little escapist tricks he had never realized he did and had never connected to the more Technicolor sins: e.g., ways he (mis) used humor, or made subtle excuses for himself, or felt sorry for himself. God "seemed far away" at the beginning of the process, when he was fog-bound; God seemed very, very close, relevant, and desirable as the process unfolded. Christ's grace became very real and necessary. He became motivated to practical change—to face pressures and responsibilities, to learn to love others, to God's glory.¹

¹ David A. Powlison, "[X-Ray Questions: Drawing Out the Whys and Wherefores of Human Behavior](#)," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Number 1, Fall 1999 18 (1999): 2–8.