

QUESTIONS TO HELP THE COUNSELOR IDENTIFY THE RULING DESIRES OF A PERSON'S HEART¹

Developed by David Powlison

X-Ray questions to aid in discerning and exploring the patterns of a person's motivation.

These questions are meant to help us get a feel for the pattern of a person's motivation. They reveal our "functional gods," what actually controls our actions and thoughts and emotions. These are "why?" questions, framed concretely (as "what?" questions) to draw out the specific "causes" of the direction our life is going. Any of them can be asked directly in this or appropriately altered form. But they are not always questions to ask directly of another—or even ourselves. Sometimes it is better simply to listen and observe, combing through the "fruit" of a person's life for the pattern of his heart. We ought always to bear these kinds of questions in mind as we think about people.

If minds are to be renewed, if hearts are to be progressively transformed, if the knowledge of God is to grow, then we must accurately grasp these issues. Heartfelt appropriation of and appreciation for Jesus Christ hangs on such intelligent conviction.

Notice that all these questions "circle" around the same basic issues. There are many ways of asking the same general question. In individual situations—different times, places, people—one or another may be more appropriate and helpful. Each of these questions can be focused "microscopically"—to dissect one particular incident in a person's life—or "wide angle"—to illuminate the recurrent and typical patterns that characterize a person's entire life.

- What do/did you want, desire, seek, aim for, pursue, hope for?
- What were your goals, expectations or intentions?
- What do you feel like doing? Do you want what you want, or do you want Christ's lordship over your life?
- Where do you look for security or meaning or happiness or fulfillment or joy or comfort? Where do you put your "basic trust"?
- What would make you happy?
- What do you fear? What do you want? What do you tend to avoid?
- What do you tend to worry about?
- What do you love and hate most of all? What sorts of things make you angry or judgmental or threatened? What sorts of things make you exhilarated, delighted, or obsessed?
- How do you define success or failure in any particular situation? How and to whom do you attempt to prove yourself?

¹ © CCEF, David Powlison: used by permission

- What image do you have of who you are? Of who you ought to be or want to be?
- At your death bed, what would sum up your life as worthwhile?
- What do you see as your rights?
- In what situation do you feel pressured or tense? When you are pressured or tense, where do you turn? What do you think about? What are your “escapes”? What are you escaping from?
- What payoff do you seek out of the things you do? “What do you get out of doing that?” Where or in what do you seek your reward?
- What do you pray for?
- What do you think about most often? What preoccupies or obsesses you? In the morning, to what does your mind drift instinctively?
- What do you talk about? What is important to you?
- How do you spend your time? What are your priorities?
- What are your characteristic fantasies? Daydreams? Dreams? What brings you joy and what strikes terror into your heart?
- What repeated patterns are discernable in the situations in which you become irritated? Fearful? Anxious? Depressed? Hopeful? Happy?
- What is your “working theology” or world-view? What kinds of things do you believe about God, people, yourself, sins, forgiveness, the purpose of life, the *summum bonum* [don’t dare ask it this way!], suffering, how God works, the source of true happiness, what happens when we die, etc?
- In what do you place your trust? In what do you set your hope? Around what does your life “organize”? What are your “idols”? Your “gods”? What drives you?
- What rules you? What “voice” controls you? To what or whom do you listen or “have ears”?
- What are ways you are “playing God”? Trying to maintain control of your world? “Building your own kingdom”?