

YES OR NO?  
[written in oral style]

Matthew 22:15-22  
Proper 24, Year A

October 18, 2020  
Gordon Allaby

We use and encounter Yes or No questions all the time.  
Occasionally, they are useful, but...rarely.

Even the basic questions directed to children fail to be helpful, such as:  
Did you brush your teeth ....or...wash your hands?

A yes answer does not reveal the degree of cleaning <

The same with, "Do you know how to play this game?" or "Do you believe in God?"

A "No" is somewhat informative, but a Yes says nothing about depth of comprehension.

~~~~~  
Yes and No questions forces the recipient to straddle a fence, and to fall on one side or the other.  
But, what if neither side is desirable?

How does one respond when a partner asks, "Do you think I have lost weight?" [ ]

~~~~~  
These questions can be a trap, such as, "Are you ticklish?" <

Or, "Have you stopped beating your dog?" [ ]

~~~~~  
Being on a fence and not wanting to fall on either side is awkward, even painful.

~~~~~  
While I was living in Kansas, the judge was screening potential jurors for a trial. A 17 year old year old boy foolishly took someone's expensive bike for a joy ride. He had no priors, yet because of the value of the bike and his age, he was charged with a felony theft. Maximum punishment was 5 years in prison.

The jury could Not determine the penalty.  
I knew I did not want to be a part of this trial that had such a harsh punishment. I told the judge that.

Regardless, the judge kept asking me, "Yes or No, given the facts, do you think you can make a sound decision?"

I replied, "I cannot put this young man in prison." "I would like to be excused from jury duty."

With increasing frustration and intensity, he kept asking me the same Yes or No question. I responded as before.

Suddenly, he stopped when a man walked into the courtroom.  
The judge said, "I would like to introduce the prosecuting attorney. His name is Jim Kaufmann."

I raised my hand, the judge called on me, and I said, "I am Mr. Kaufmann's pastor."  
I was excused from jury duty.

I later learned the teenager was found guilty, and put on probation.

~~~~~  
Yes and No questions can be ugly, even abusive.

They can be a malicious trap.

And, forcing others to be on a fence can be a nasty, manipulative power grab.

~~~~~  
This is what happened in the hostile takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The takeover was a scheme by two power hungry, abusive men, and it was for political reasons.

You may be thinking that as a progressive, I may be overly harsh on these two conservative men.

Wait for the end of the story.

~~~~~  
Some background is necessary.

In the late 1970's, the Southern Baptist Convention was the biggest protestant denomination, and still is, even though they lost over 5 million members. They were led by moderates, and their seminaries had become quite progressive.

Also, remember that since the Civil War, the Southern States were solidly for the Democratic Party.

They distained the party of Lincoln.

Yet, change was happening in that allegiance because, in part, the Democratic Party had embraced the civil rights movement.

In 1978, two men saw the opportunity to completely flip the south to the more conservative Republican Party. They would use the S.B.C.

A Texas judge, Paul Pressler and his friend Paige Patterson met in a Texas coffee shop to finalize their plans, in 1978.

They had discovered a weakness in the S.B.C. polity. The structure entrusted the elected president to appoint members to all the mission and seminary boards. They determined that it would take about 10 years of conservative appointments to control all aspects of the denomination.

But, they needed to rally / motivate rightwing conservatives to attend the annual convention and vote for their conservative candidate.

~~~~~  
They devised a Yes or No litmus test with the question:

**Do you believe the Bible is inerrant?**

They publically demanded a Yes or No answer to all leaders and professors, asking "Do you believe the Bible is inerrant?"

"Is God's word in the Bible / every word perfect without error or flaw?" Yes or No?

~~~~~

Forced on the fence, moderates and progressives kept falling off with their rational answers, such as: The Bible we use is an English translation, and which translation are you referring to? And, translations are not perfect.

Or,

We do not have autograph documents to confirm accuracy of the scriptures..... And, on and on ...they fell to the NO side.

~~~~~

The rightwing conservatives were appalled and outraged about learning that their leaders did not believe the Bible to be true.

Of course, that wasn't the question, ....yet that was the trap of the Yes or No petition. It suggested, if the Bible has errors then it cannot be trusted. Therefore, it had to be inerrant.

~~~~~

The S.B.C. usually had about 12-15,000 people attend their annual convention. In 1979, 40,000 attended, and many were bused in just in time to vote on the president.

Their hardcore, conservative candidate, Adrian Rogers, was elected.

Not long after that, he made the shocking assertion that "God only listens to Christians; God does Not listen to the prayers of Jews."

~~~~~

The nefarious takeover had begun.

In 1980, most of the South rejected their native son, Jimmy Carter, in the national election. All but Georgia voted for Reagan.

~~~~~

A little over ten years later, that simple Yes or No question secured the S.B.C.'s takeover. By 1995, nearly all of the professors at the seminary I attended were fired or forced to leave. And, the Evangelical, Southern US became firmly in the Republican camp, to be used and manipulated with another Yes or No question.

"Are you pro life or pro abortion?"

~~~~~

~~~~~

In 1989, President George Bush nominated Judge Pressler to the office of Government Ethics. Paige Patterson became president of the denomination, and then president at a SB seminary.

Their power move was paying dividends.

~~~~~

I called the two "power hungry, abusive men."

~~~~~

In 2018, seminary president Paige Patterson was fired after several rape investigations.

Later that same year, numerous victims came forward revealing that Judge Pressler had abused them when they were boys. That horrific abuse of young boys had been going on for over 40 years.

The two were power hungry, abusive people, and they are responsible for a lot of hurt, damage and evil.

Yes and No questions are too often a power grab that set people up to fall off the fence.

~~~~~

Another Yes or No question with political overtones:  
This one is two thousand years old.

Herodians and Pharisees set out to trap Jesus with a yes or no question?

The Pharisees opposed paying taxes to Caesar / the Romans.  
The Herodians, who were given political power by the Romans, of course supported the tax.

The "head" tax, or poll tax was leveled on all males over 14 years of age, and females over 12.  
The tax was paid with a special, silver denarius coin that had the print of Caesar's face on it.  
Most Jews resented having to submit to an idolatrous image.

~~~~~

Before they asked the question, the two groups tried to soften Jesus up with flattery, hoping it would cause him to lower his guard.

They asked, "Yes or No, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?"

The "lawful" was from the point of view of Mosaic Law.

They were intending to drag Jesus into the polarity of politics.  
From the fence, he could fall to the Yes side appeasing the Herodians and Romans, yet upsetting most of the Jews, at the time.

A fall to the No side would be treason against Rome.

~~~~~??~~~~~

Jesus refused the trap. He refused to be put on the fence.  
Jesus identified their malice, and called them hypocrites.

~~~~~

When put on a fence, the better choice than falling on one side or the other is to demolish the fence.....  
Demolish the fence.

~~~~~ ~~~~~

A brief digression:

Over ten years ago, MC Canada was confronted by some churches to answer yes or no about the acceptability of non-heterosexuality.

I was pleased to see MC Canada avoid the fence. Instead, they launched the study called "Being a Faithful Church."

In frustration, some churches left MC Canada, but integrity did Not leave the denomination.

~~~~~

Back 2,000 years:

Jesus asked them to show him this special tax coin.

Oops, low and behold, they had one. They were using the empire's system. They Were hypocrites!

So, Jesus said "give it back." He did not say "pay back."

He said, "**Give** it back." Give what belongs to the empire back to them / let go of it.

Then Jesus added, "Give to God the things that are God's."

~~~~~

Everyone was amazed,.....and they knew Everything was God's, including themselves.

~~~~~

Some have argued that this episode justifies a "Two Kingdom" ideology, but far from it.

Jesus was not saying, There is the secular, government domain and then there is God's.

Accepting the Two Kingdom myth allows Christians to do war because the government demands it.

While God demands only spiritual piety and spiritual loyalty.

**There are No two kingdoms.**

God is over all, even governments.

~~~~~

This passage exposes Jesus' refusal to be put on a fence and drawn into partisan politics. He did not drag God into a political power struggle.

Richard Rohr, this past week, wrote, "Jesus' quietly refused to participate in almost all external power structures or domination systems."

Some of us wish he would have. There is so much injustice in the world, it is tempting to use Jesus to pull God into the fight.

Yes, it is very persuasive to claim God is on your side, as two Texans did.

~~~~~

Nevertheless, we are not here to conquer. Yes, we fight for justice, but God does Not call us to control others or defeat the opposition.

We are Not commissioned to even be "successful."

~~~~~

We are invited to be followers of Christ.

We are called by God to be faithful..... to be faithful.

And, that means we can trust God is doing God's part in the world.