

A QUARTET OF

LIFE-CHANGING  
QUESTIONS

AND OTHER ESSAYS BY JOE R. BARNETT

THE CHRISTIAN  
**Appeal**

## Preface



Stacy Conner

**“A** prudent question is one-half of wisdom,” wrote Sir Francis Bacon, pointing to the truth that the quality of our questions has a lot to do with the direction and the quality of our lives. We’re pleased in this issue to share some more fine essays by Dr. Joe Barnett. In the title essay, he will point us to “A Quartet of Life-changing Questions.” May our lives bear witness to the fact that each day we are living to answer them well.

## A Truly Life-changing QUESTION



Curtis Shelburne

**B** “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say that I am?”

\* Jesus  
Matthew 16

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# a quartet of life-changing **QUESTIONS**

**ANSWERING** the following questions will jumpstart the next chapter of your life.

## ***Is This in My Control?***

**You can save yourself a lot of agitation by sorting out what is in your control and what isn't.**

**Your actions, words, and thoughts are in your control. Other people, the weather, and some life events are not.**

Curtis Shelburne

Whatever you're facing, ask, "Is this something I can control?" The answer will tell you if it's worthy of your concern.

You'll be happier and more productive if you focus attention on the things you can control and avoid getting bent out of shape by the things you can't.

Freedom comes from letting go of the things that are beyond your control.

*"God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Timothy 1:7, ESV).*

## ***Is This Worth Worrying About?***

Worry saps stamina, triggers health problems, torpedoed optimism, impairs judgment, and

smothers gratitude.

Worry doubles your trouble: if what you're worrying about doesn't happen, you've lived through it once needlessly; if it does

**"YOU CAN SAVE YOURSELF A LOT OF AGITATION BY SORTING OUT WHAT IS IN YOUR CONTROL AND WHAT ISN'T."**

happen, you'll have lived through it twice.

Worrying will change neither your past nor your future but will poison your present.

*"Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?" (Matthew 6:27, NLT).*

*"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything . . . If you do this you will*

*experience God's peace. His peace will keep your thoughts and your hearts quiet and at rest as you trust in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6–7).*

**"THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON ASSURES US THAT THE LOVING FATHER KEEPS THE DOOR WIDELY OPEN."**

### ***Is This the Most Important Thing to Me?***

What's the most important thing to you? If you don't know the answer to this question, you have no way of knowing if you're putting first things first.

What is most important to someone else doesn't necessarily fit you, so avoid living by their priorities.

When you know what the most important thing is to you, you are positioned to say "No!" to less important things and opt out of races that don't move you toward your goal.

Nail down what the most important thing is to you; own it. The biggest danger is self-deception—telling yourself something is the most important thing when deep down it isn't. Get honest.

The most important thing in life is to know what the most important thing in life is.

*"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:2).*

### ***Is This Who I Want To Be?***

Blunt fact: you are what you say and do.

Blunt truth: you're not good if your words and actions are bad.

Measure your stature by asking if what you're saying and doing exhibit the kind of person you want to be. Do you judge? Gossip? Spew negative thoughts? Is this the person you want to be?

Stop yourself mid-stride when you're about to say

something critical or do something hurtful and ask if this is the person you want to be?

*"Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37).*

*"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable . . . think about these things" (Philippians 4:8–9).*



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# don't be **AFRAID**

**TO ABRAM, God said, “Do not be afraid . . . I am your shield” (Genesis 15:1).**

**To Joshua, God said, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).**

**To Isaiah, God said, “Comfort my people,” telling them, “Do**

not fear, for I am with you . . . I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you . . .” (Isaiah 41:10).

To his disciples, Jesus said, “My peace I give you. . . . Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

Now, reread those four verses—but this time, insert your name in each as the recipient of the message.

God is just as powerful and concerned today as he was in the days of Abraham, Joshua, Isaiah, and Jesus, right?

Do you believe God is in charge: all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful? That’s a “yes” or “no” question, not a question with conditions attached—not, “Well, yes, I

believe that, but . . .”

Another question: Do you trust God to do the right thing? “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” asked Abraham (Genesis 18:25). It’s a

**“ IF YOU’VE DISCIPLINED YOURSELF TO SEE GOD IN CONTROL, THAT’S WHAT YOU WILL SEE. ”**

rhetorical question, the obvious answer being, “Of course he will.” Do you believe that?

When people listen to you talk, do they hear faith or fear? If they could read your thoughts, would they see serenity or despair?

Behavioral scientists assert that we see things that we’ve conditioned ourselves to see. If you’ve disciplined yourself to

see God in control, that's what you will see; you'll be pleasant company and sleep well. If you've conditioned yourself to see doom and gloom, that's what you will see; you'll be

**"FEAR AND WORRY SUCK THE OXYGEN OUT OF FAITH. WORRY RESISTS SHARING THE SPACE WITH FAITH."**

unpleasant company and won't sleep well.

Are you limping through life, worrying (synonym for fear) about everything from global warming to political corruption to catastrophic accidents to hangnails to you-name-it, refusing to face the uncomfortable truth that this deadly cancer is poisoning your faith? It's not incurable but can be fatal left untreated.

Fear and worry suck the oxygen out of faith. When worry takes up residence in the mind, it resists sharing the space with faith.

God can change you if you'll let him: "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). That's an inward change that God can make in you, but he won't make it without your consent and cooperation.

So clean out the garage; take the negative junk to the dumpster. Purge the closets; get rid of the old duds and put some color in your wardrobe—you've been wearing drab long enough.

You choose what you believe . . . and what you don't believe. Go back to the top of this essay and

drink a dose of those four verses again. Put some zip in your faith.

If you truly believe God is all-powerful and that he will do what is right, that's quite enough to ensure a calm and peaceful life.

Let's write a prayer together. I'll start. You finish.

*Dear God,  
Many things in our world—excuse me, your*

*world—seem to be falling apart. Please grant that our faith may not fail.*

*Help us believe in you unconditionally. When our faith falters, remind us to say, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid" (Psalm 56:3–4).*

You take it from there . . .



Curtis Shelburne



# lower the flag to **HALF-STAFF**

**JOHN GLENN.** Everyone knows the name of this American hero who flew fifty-nine combat missions in World War II and twenty-seven in Korea; first American to orbit the earth, and the oldest man in space when, at seventy-seven, he flew with the Space Shuttle Discovery crew; four-term U. S. Senator from Ohio.

Curtis Shelburne

His history of accomplishment is on exhibit at Ohio State University's John Glenn College of Public Affairs. One panel features his high school civics teacher, Harford Steele, citing the prof as the person who taught him the importance of public service—in Glenn's words, "igniting a fire in me that never did go out."

Flags weren't lowered when Harford Steele died, but it was his influence that caused American flags to be flown at half-staff for nine days all over the world when John Glenn died on December 8, 2016.

Remember Joseph, the Levite from Cyprus? Probably not, because you don't know him by that name. You know him by

his nickname, Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement."

You might never have heard of the Apostle Paul if Barnabas hadn't given him a boost. On Paul's

**"YOU MIGHT NEVER HAVE HEARD OF THE APOSTLE PAUL IF BARNABAS HADN'T GIVEN HIM A BOOST."**

first trip to Jerusalem after his conversion, he was shunned. The church wanted nothing to do with him, thought he was a fraud. But Barnabas stood up for him, and he was accepted. Later, when Paul was isolated in Tarsus, Barnabas recruited him, brought him to Antioch, and then accompanied him on his first missionary journey.

Then there was John Mark. You'd probably know nothing about him if Barnabas hadn't taken him under his wing.

After jump-starting the careers of these two

**"A COMMON INGREDIENT IN THE LIVES OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE LIVED UP TO THEIR POTENTIAL IS THE GIFT OF ENCOURAGEMENT."**

evangelists, Barnabas faded into the background. He never wrote a book or letter that found its way into your Bible, but it was his encouragement that launched the ministries of two men who, combined, wrote half of the New Testament.

A common ingredient in the lives of people who have lived up to their potential is the gift of

encouragement. Someone believed in them, supported them, ignited the fire.

For John Wesley, it was his mother, Susanna.

For John Quincy Adams, it was his father, John.

For cleric Henry Ward Beecher, it was a teacher who taught only one year in the rural elementary school he attended.

For humanitarian and author Stanley Mooneyham, it was a County Superintendent of Schools.

For Paul Harvey, it was his widowed mother Anna and his beloved elementary school teacher, Miss Harp.

For American Olympic gymnast Simone Biles, it was her grandparents, Ron and Nellie Biles.

Not to take anything

away from your fine gifts and commendable accomplishments, but you are who you are and are doing what you're doing because of the influence of a parent, grandparent, teacher, friend—a Harford Steele, a Barnabas.

Most of us are not beacons, just small lights: not playing on the big stage, but filling an important, though unheralded, role on a small platform. Whatever the part, someone saw something in us, believed

in us, encouraged us.

For me, it was parents, friends—and other early influences: Mrs. Womack, my First Grade Sunday School teacher; Vance Mitchell, my junior high Sunday School teacher; Clarence Nelson, an elder in my boyhood church.

For you, it was \_\_\_\_\_.

Lower the flag. Thank the Father.



Josh Shelburne





# the proximity **EFFECT**

**SOONER OR LATER** nearly every church is contaminated by contention. Like cancer, it infiltrates furtively at first and goes undetected. But eventually, it metastasizes and permeates the body, resulting in severely depleted strength. Or death.

## *Toxic Intruders*

Paul used a lot of ink exhorting Christians to encourage one

another, build each other up, love one another. He was following up on Jesus' instruction: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35).

Satan's most effective tactic for destroying a church is to infiltrate it with those who are divisive. He chooses intruders carefully: they are often persuasive, charismatic, invariably wearing a mask of love.

And they are toxic!

Don't ever be influenced by destroyers of unity. They are contagious—a hazard to your spiritual health. "I urge you, brethren," wrote Paul, "note those who cause

division . . . and avoid them" (Romans 16:17).

If you give a sympathetic ear to the disrupter of unity, you become a partner in the crime of conflict. "Don't invite him

**"CONTENTION IN A CHURCH INFILTRATES FURTIVELY AT FIRST, BUT EVENTUALLY PERMEATES THE BODY."**

in and give him the run of the place. That would just give him a platform to perpetuate his evil way, making you his partner" (2 John 10–11, MSG).

Paul counseled Titus that after trying twice, "have nothing more to do with a person who causes conflict, because you know that someone like this is twisted and sinful" (Titus 3:10–11, CEB).

If you get sucked in by a divisive person, you will be polluted. Don't bathe in dirty water.

Proverbs 6:16-19 tags seven things that are detestable to God, the final

**"IF YOU GET SUCKED IN BY A DIVISIVE PERSON, YOU'LL BE POLLUTED. DON'T BATHE IN DIRTY WATER."**

one being a person "who stirs up trouble among brothers."

Don't give a divisive person the keys to your church.

### ***Friends or Foes?***

Now, let's switch gears and talk, not about church matters, but about those you hang out with. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, widely considered

Germany's greatest literary figure, said, "Tell me who you spend time with, and I will tell you who you are."

You may think you're strong enough to buck the pull of the profligate, but that's naïve. The Apostle Paul said it this way: "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good

morals'" (1 Corinthians 15:33, ESV).

The words and actions of those you spend time with influence your disposition, decisions, and direction. It goes both ways: "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm" (Proverbs 13:20).

The character of your companions rubs off on

you, for good or bad: work behind the perfume counter, and you'll smell like perfume; work in the fish market, and you'll smell like fish.

Ask this question about the company you're keeping: Is this relationship moving me closer to the Lord or further from him?

Nor is it just about personal relationships. You are also influenced by what you read, what

you watch, where you go. The environment you choose sculpts you into its image. It's been called "the proximity effect."

Choose your company carefully. "Oh, the joys of those who do not follow evil men's advice, who do not hang around with sinners, scoffing at the things of God" (Psalm 1:1, TLB).

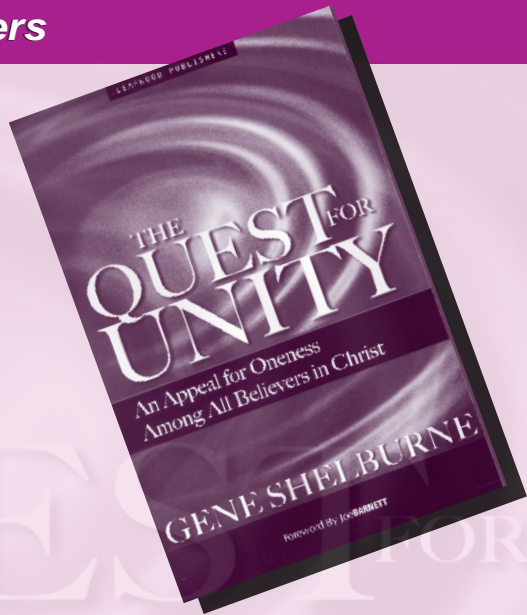


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