

Study Questions for BLT 53, no. 3 (summer 2008)

The Map

By Jeff Neuman-Lee

1. We describe many difficult ideas in Christian faith by comparing them to things we know well. For instance, God is not literally a shepherd but we think of God as having the characteristics of a shepherd. Jeff Neuman-Lee compares the Bible to a map. Think of all the ways in which the Bible is like a map.
2. One problem with analogies or comparisons is that we sometimes confuse the symbol for the real thing. What danger, if any, is there in comparing God to a shepherd, a rock, a fortress, a garden, or any other common object?
3. Jesus said, “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39). What do you think Jesus is saying? What importance do scriptures have in the development of your faith?
4. Neuman-Lee talks about the perspective with which each one of us looks at scripture. We come at it as a book of judgment, a book about politics of Jesus’ time, a book about personal salvation, a book about history, or a book about the beginning of the church. What is your “perspective”? In other words, if the Bible is a map, where is it that you want to go? What questions do you bring that will be answered by looking at the map?
5. “By raising the Bible to an equivalence with the Holy Spirit, do we not raise it above the place God has given to it? It must not be the object of our worship, the scriptures *testify on [Jesus’] behalf*. The book is not about the book. It is about Jesus.” How does this claim affect the authority that the Bible has in life?
6. When John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1), who or what is the Word? Why does he use the word “Word” and not “Spirit” or “Christ”?
7. What do people mean when they say scripture is literally true? What do they mean when they say that scripture is inspired? What do they mean when they say that scripture is metaphor? Can more than one of these be true at a time?
8. Why did Jesus’ speak in parables? Why didn’t he speak in a more straightforward way?
9. Jesus scoffs at the need for signs of his true identity. Proof of the truth seems worthless to him. Why? How might Jesus describe the difference between faith and knowledge?
10. “This is how much of Jesus’ communication has worked in my life. Backwards. I hear what he wants, but I don’t really want to understand it, and when I let myself understand it, I avoid it. Then at some point I try it out, only to find out that Jesus was correct.” Which teachings of Jesus have you avoided in life? Tell about an instance in which you changed your mind about one of Jesus’ teachings, either accepting it or rejecting it.