

WHAT COULD I SAY? LEARNING TO ANSWER OUR FRIENDS' QUESTIONS

Sometimes we're nervous about witnessing for Christ because we're afraid we'll be asked questions we can't answer.

This is a problem we can help each other solve! Put a small group of intelligent Christians together, and you soon find we've got the raw material we need for the questions we get asked.

So in our church, we can set aside an evening to discuss the objections we've heard our friends raise about our faith. Break into groups of 5-8, and list the questions you've heard. Then together we can share ways we respond.

This feature is intended to back you up in this exercise. It lists a few of the approaches you could use as starting-points. Some may not be relevant to your situation. But you can sort that out!

Remember your aim is never to argue people into the Kingdom. That's not possible; only God can lead us through! Your aim is – lovingly and prayerfully – to get the problems out of the way, so that together you can share about what really matters: who Jesus was, what he has done; where we stand before God, what we each need to do about it...

? Our world has many sincerely-held beliefs. How can Jesus be the only way? Aren't all religions true?

- Sincerity's not the issue: we can all be sincerely mistaken. In the end, some things are either true or false. Jesus either was or was not what he claimed to be – the unique I AM, the Creator, the only way to God. No other major religious teacher has made this incredible claim. Was Jesus right or wrong?
- Again, it's either true or false that we can't please God by what we do, and that our sins can only be paid for if God himself rescued us by dying for them. Jesus' gospel stands alone in daring to say this.
- If these claims are true, all other religions must ultimately be incomplete. *All* religions cannot be 100% true, because they contradict each other. There may be many good insights in each, but the most vital question is how we can be right with God. If that can happen through human efforts or ceremonies, Christ's death was unnecessary. So we cannot have Christ's cross and other religions too.
- Historical evidence: no other religious teacher has risen from the dead! (See for example chapter 10 of Josh McDowell's fine book *More than a Carpenter*, downloadable free (see google!)) If Christ's resurrection is a historical fact, then we're dealing with something unique in history; only Jesus frees us from death.

? But what about those who have never heard your gospel?

- God is utterly just and also utterly loving. We trust them to his care!
- There are many things we aren't sure about (as is the case in science too). And we aren't embarrassed about that! Some Christians say that those who haven't heard the gospel are without salvation. Others believe that Christ's death can cover them too, if they have turned to what they've been shown of God for mercy, in repentance and faith. (Just as Abraham was saved, though he never knew Christ by name.)

- But the practical issue is --- what about those who *have* heard, like you and me?

? The Bible is full of mistakes!

- Have you really read it as an adult? What mistakes are you thinking of?
- Of course the Bible contains things hard for us to grasp. And so does science. (Is light made up of waves or particles? You could put it either way, says science. Is that a contradiction? No, but our understanding, and our verbal pictures, are limited.)
- For centuries people have attacked the Bible. Yet what contradiction or error is categorically proven? In so old and diverse a book, that is most remarkable.
- It's superficial to attack the Bible without reading it. Why not join an exploratory Bible study with a listening heart, and see how God can speak to you through his Word?

? Science has disproved Christianity!

- In that case it's surprising that so many leading scientists are Christian.
- Science continually grows and learns. If history continues, our science will seem as strange to the 23rd century as the 18th century's does to us. All we can have are provisional understandings.
- Evolution is another issue over which Christians feel free to differ. Many have no difficulties believing both evolution and the Bible; so it hasn't been proven that the two are irreconcilable. Others rightly observe that evolutionary theory is far from finally 'proven' (scientific theories never are). And yet others notice that some secular cosmologists have described the evolutionary process as so problematic that a higher intelligence from space must have watched over it to make it work (cf Fred Hoyle, *Evolution from Space*) – ie, if there's evolution, there must be some sort of Creator!

? I don't believe in all those miracles!

- Maybe your science is out of date. In the world of quantum physics, it's impossible to rule out extraordinary events like miracles.
- If there's a God who created the scientific laws, that same God can suspend or supersede them.
- Historical fact: since the resurrection happened, then not only is our own bondage to death broken, but our bondage to all the world's other 'laws' is subject to God's loving and healing intervention!

? How could God allow so much suffering?

- The Bible teaches no easy answers to this question. At the heart of Christian faith is a man on a Cross shouting, 'My God, my God, *why?*' In Revelation we read of the 'sealed book' of war, famine, imperialism, economic injustice, disease and religious persecution: and we find it's something only Christ can comprehend, 'because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God' (5:9). Christ alone went to the utter heart of the darkness; he took human pain very seriously, and he alone sees and understands all our suffering.
- There are some other partial answers. At the start of history, humankind insisted on running our own world, rather than submitting to God's reign. Our world has been wrecked as a result, and we haven't the power to put it right. Yet each of us still repeats that mistake, demanding to do things our way.
- Christ's death was God's loving response: he got involved in our suffering, removed the guilt and power of sin, disarmed the demonic powers, and opened up the way through death.
- But if God stamped out all the evil in the world right now, we'd each be dead too! So instead he calls us to work with him; learning in suffering, building a new community marked by his love and peace and healing, and slowly spreading his transforming power.
- But one day he will come back. If we are his, we will then be in a new heaven and earth where at last there will be 'no more death or crying or pain' (Rev 21:4).

? Doesn't God hate homosexuals?

- God certainly does not hate homosexuals! He loves and values them so much he died in colossal agony for them, just the same as for straight people. We love gay people too; there are people of gay orientation in our church, and we pray that there will be many more.
- God does say clearly in the Bible that homosexual practice, equally with any other kind of sex outside marriage, is wrong. That doesn't make it a worse sin than many others we do. But following Jesus is ultimately about trusting (and obeying) him; and in this case that means faith that he knows best about our sexuality.
- We are very aware that these are very difficult and painful issues for many gay people, as for many heterosexual singles, and we pray that any gay person will feel welcome in our services, whether they agree with us or not.

? Following Christ is OK for you but I'm happy without it.

- If there really is a God, to try and make our life work without him is like attempting a jigsaw puzzle after throwing the central piece away! Some bits will work, but as a whole it won't make sense.
- This life on earth is just the tiniest fraction of our total existence. Since God is our Maker, to ignore his purposes is to miss the whole point of the millions of years we will exist.
- One day we must face God, and account to him for how we used the life he gave us, and how we responded to the salvation he died to offer us.

- Jesus told us there is a heaven (being totally with God, the source of all love, joy, and peace), and a hell (being without God, experiencing none of these). In this life we can still know joy even while moving away from God: we're like an electric fire that's been disconnected from the power source, but hasn't yet gone dark and cold. But if we live without God now, then, logically, we'll be separated from him in eternity. To be separate from God then will mean total separation from all love, joy, and peace; drifting into the darkness forever. That is what Jesus calls hell.

? But surely if I'm a basically good person, that will be enough for God?

- If it were so easy, why did Christ die? Watch him go through the agony of Gethsemane, and then the desolation when he cried out on Calvary. Why, if we could be acceptable to God without all that?
- Hadn't we better face up to God's infinite, majestic holiness? His purity is unimaginable; before him 'all our good deeds are like filthy rags'. Even our best deeds are flawed by pride, by self-righteousness. Some of us may be better than others – but none are good enough to stand before the majesty of God.
- Only Jesus' gospel dares face this radical truth. Because only Jesus offers us the solution: God himself has come down, become human, and died for our sins; and now he offers to forgive us and put his own nature within us, when we are 'born again' in repentance and faith...

Pete Lowman.