



UNIT 5

Chapter 6

Responding to Religious Questions and Objections

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Responding to Religious Questions and Objections



*To be ignorant and simple now—
not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground—
would be to throw down our weapons and betray our uneducated brethren who have,
under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen.
Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason,
because bad philosophy needs to be answered.*

— C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), author, scholar



*But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.
Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone
who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.
But do this with gentleness and respect.*

— 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)



Apologetics¹

There are two aspects to a Christian defense: *information* and *tactics*. The classical approach to apologetics is giving a specific response to a particular issue. In the words of Peter, it is making a “defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). This usually deals with content, information, and reasons why someone should believe that Christianity is true.

Informational Defense

There are two types of informational defense. One type of informational defense is *defensive apologetics* (i.e., defending the faith when Christianity is challenged). This involves, for example, responding to challenges on the authority of the Bible, or answering the mystery of evil and suffering.

The other type of informational defense is *offensive apologetics* (i.e., making a positive case for the truthfulness of Christianity). This might involve presenting evidence for the existence of God or the resurrection of Jesus. The current big issues that we may encounter are radical relativism (including moral

¹ Much of this Christian apologetics information came from a class “Tactics in Defending the Faith” taught by Gregory Koukl during a Defending the Faith Series taught at Biola University, La Mirada, CA, April 2000. Greg Koukl is an outstanding apologist who is the founder and president of Stand to Reason, which can be found online at www.str.org.

relativism), the historical accuracy of the Gospels, competing ideas of who Jesus really is, the problem of evil, and ethical issues like abortion, homosexuality, and physician-assisted suicide.

Tactical Defense

The second aspect of a Christian defense is the tactics we use in defending the faith. These are a little harder to define. This does not have to do with introducing new information, either offensively or defensively. Rather, tactics involves how we employ resources or knowledge already in our possession in an orderly, immediate, hands-on maneuvering of the particulars. Tactics deal with the *techniques* of using what we know, the *style* we use in dealing with people who raise objections, the *methods* of how to address certain types of attacks on our faith, and *principles* of sound reasoning and clear thinking.²

Our attitude will have a dynamic influence on our apologetic approach. The first is our *vertical attitude*—our God-ward view of God's part and man's part in apologetics. We do our part (using evidence and persuasion) and God does His part (drawing people into the kingdom). We trust God's Spirit to change people's hearts while we employ our best efforts and our best arguments to show them the truth. Keep in mind that the mind, not the Bible, is the very first line of defense God has given you against error. Of course, the Bible is first in terms of authority, but the mind is first in terms of the order of knowing. In order to understand the truth of the Bible accurately, we need to have our mental faculties intact and we must use them properly as God intended. God prefers to use a good argument to draw people to Himself, rather than a bad one.

The second is our *horizontal attitude*—our person-ward view of how we approach those we witness to. We are not to be a spiritual bully. Our manner should be gentle and reverent (1 Peter 3:15), patient and not quarrelsome (2 Timothy 2:24-25), and gracious, wise and tactical (Colossians 4:5-6).

When fishing, we have several different lures, rods, reels, etc., for a particular presentation according to the need of the moment. As a fisher of men, we use different approaches for different circumstances. Human beings are individuals; therefore, we need to treat them that way. We need to try to couch our comments in the context of the other person's situation.

One of the great privileges of being a Chaplain is to be able to talk with people about problems that have bothered them and kept them from following Christ. Many have wished to be able to speak about issues that trouble them with someone who has knowledge of the Bible. However, they have lacked the opportunity or did not take the time. This chapter contains many typical objections and possible responses. It is important to be familiar with them, but we should not limit ourselves to only one answer. There are several possible ways we can respond. Many times, even though we may know a good reply, it may not be the best time to state it. We should be aware of several reasons why a person may bring up an objection to spiritual truth.

Just as there are different types of questions, there are also different types of questioners. For example, there is the *serious inquirer*, the *arguer*, and the *x generation*.

The Serious Inquirer

This person is bothered by something that s/he has heard or experienced. S/he wants to know what the Bible says about a topic or what is the Christian viewpoint on an issue. These people deserve our time and the best answer that we can give them.

The Arguer

We soon find that this individual does not want to really learn the truth. The Arguer merely wants to tell us his/her position, but does not want to listen to what we have to say. It is never wise to argue. We can

² For a complete explanation regarding apologetic tactics, listen to the audio tapes on "Tactics in Defending the Faith" by Gregory Koukl (San Pedro, CA: Stand to Reason, 2000).

tell this type of person that we appreciate that s/he has studied a lot and then simply terminate the conversation with a smile. We can say that it doesn't really matter what either of us thinks about a subject because the important thing is to determine what the Bible actually says about it. We can suggest that the best thing is for both of us to study the Bible more. Do not feel that we need to get in the last word. We want to leave each visit on a pleasant note, showing our acceptance of the person even though we might disagree with some of his/her views.

The X Generation

A study of the so-called X (or Buster) Generation (the 38 million born between 1963 and 1977) found that 81% of them do not believe there is absolute truth. Evangelist Leighton Ford, who ministers to Xers, states that story-telling is an effective communication tool to reach them. To them, how the Bible relates to their situation is more important than intellectual apologetics. They can connect more with the stories of Jesus from the Gospels than from Paul's theological writings. Sharing our own testimony or that of another may often be a better response than any answer stressing logic.

Politically Sensitive Issues

Special caution needs to be taken in responding to emotionally charged subjects. A patient asked a Chaplain what he believed about a certain life-style. The Chaplain knew that this activity was forbidden in Scripture, but also knew this fact would offend the patient. He replied that what he believed about this subject was not important. What really mattered was knowing God's love and the assurance of eternal life. Although the patient did not want to hear more, he thanked the Chaplain for coming and not being pushy. In another situation, a Chaplain-Trainee gave a lengthy theological response when a patient asked him a similar question. The patient complained to the staff and the Trainee was asked not to visit at that facility any more. A healthcare administrator asked a Chaplain what he would do to minister to a patient who was a Buddhist. She was satisfied when he replied that he would be respectful of the patient's worldview and would help the patient on his/her spiritual journey.

Those with Deep Emotional Needs

The objections that a person raises may not stem from any theological or logical misconception. The cause may be a hurt s/he has experienced in the past. It is important to remember to really listen to people rather than simply to the topics. Here are some examples:

- When we are told that someone does not go to church, instead of telling how important it is to attend, we might ask if s/he had a bad experience. Letting him/her tell us about it would help the person vent some of his/her hurt, which could enable us to share what fellowship with other Christians has done for us.
- If a person says that s/he has difficulty experiencing God's forgiveness, we might inquire what his/her relationship was with his/her father as a child. We will often find that his/her view of God may be clouded by the way in which the person perceived his/her earthly father.
- If someone tells us s/he does not believe in God, we might inquire if there was something that happened to the person, which caused him/her to doubt God's goodness. Exploring that situation may lead to presenting a Biblical view of God's goodness.

We should become familiar with the section on the twenty-five objections that follow and be prepared to role-play with our Teaching Chaplain what our response to each of them might be, taking into consideration both the patient's intellectual and emotional frame of reference.

Always remember that we are talking to sick people. Often they will be too tired to pursue a subject for a long time. It is important to be sensitive to how they are feeling and not prolong the discussion any longer than they seem interested. It is better to resume our discussion at a later time than to tire them. Do not forget that it is our role as a Chaplain to *comfort* them, not to convince them of the truth or to correct their false views. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

How to Handle Common Complaints and Criticisms about Christianity³

The more time we spend with healthcare patients and their families, the more we will be convinced of their need for inner peace. For whatever reason, these people have found themselves in the frightening world of illness and injury, of uncertainties and sorrows. “Why has this happened,” they often wonder.

Many patients are troubled by guilt, haunted by recent sins, or those committed in the distant past. Many feel unworthy of the love of God. Others, wounded by the circumstances of life, are bitter with regret and pain. Other patients are lonely, longing for companionship and the caring concern of another person. How wonderful that we, as a caring Chaplain, can (if invited) sit down with such people and share the Good News that they can have peace within. How wonderful that, as a Chaplain, when given permission, we will be able to share that the Lord is the same yesterday, today, and forever!

And yet, in spite of the loneliness, emptiness, guilt and uncertainty, there will always be those who are not at all anxious to hear what we have to say. These people have reasons for this reaction. And to them, these reasons are logical and real and valid. To some people, these reasons seem to be mere excuses that people offer. It is important for us, as a professional Chaplain, to remember not to invalidate or discount a person who feels deeply about his/her reasons, but instead, to simply point out the fact that there are alternatives to those ideas.

The world watches Christians carefully and expects them to be somehow “different.” They are expected to be perfect because they claim a special relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Most Christians realize that their lives often do not reflect that relationship the way they wish they would. They usually become uncomfortable when it is pointed out to them. No Christian wants another person to turn away from Christ because of his/her sinfulness, and yet time and again a Christian’s sinfulness becomes the focus of a non-Christian’s reason for turning away from a personal relationship with God. It is hard to resist becoming defensive about this, but as a Chaplain we must remember that patients are wounded people, already suffering. Our task is to bring comfort and hope, not condemnation — even of opinions and feelings we may find disagreeable.

With that in mind, look at the following twenty-five common criticisms of Christianity. As we do this, bear in mind that in the American culture, people often make statements when they want to be understood and they ask questions when they want to understand.

1. “The church is full of hypocrites”

By making such a blanket statement, the person seems to be saying that all people who claim to be Christians are hypocrites. In a sense, we are being judged as much as those faceless hypocrites to whom the person is referring. Examine our feelings. If we feel defensive and upset, it may be that we believe this statement to be true—and that is the message our body language and tone of voice will deliver to the person.

It is important to hear what the person is saying and not to invalidate him/her for having this perspective. One way to do this is to ask a question. Perhaps we might ask the person to clarify what s/he means by asking: “What do you mean? Do you believe that *all* Christians are hypocrites?”

Perhaps the person will answer in the affirmative. Maybe s/he will simply qualify his/her statement with an explanation. In any case, what s/he is doing is trying to justify personal reasons for not wanting to go to church or become a Christian.

Then we can say something like this:

³ The answers to these common complaints and criticisms about Christianity were contributed by several HCMA Chaplains. For further insights on each of the subjects, please read a book or two listed in the bibliography.

“You know, Mr. Smith, I think I understand your frustration. You have values and it offends you when they are misused. Jesus probably understood it even more because He was frustrated by hypocrisy, just as you are. Some, but not all, of the religious leaders of His day exhibited hypocritical behavior (see Matthew 23). But Jesus didn’t throw the baby out with the bath water. He continued to walk with God and to care about people who were sorry for their misdeeds. It has not been my experience that the church is full of hypocrites, but I think when people say one thing and do another; it’s in spite of everything they know to be true about God, and not because of it. I don’t know any perfect Christians, and yet I do know many people who go to church because they recognize their need of God’s love and forgiveness. What do you think?”

2. “The Bible is full of errors and contradictions”

Often this statement is made by people who have not really studied the Bible or who have only read it superficially. However, sometimes it is made by people who have read it as a philosophical or literary exercise. In either case, we have nothing to fear. There are no errors in the Word of God. So relax and trust Him to guide us. Many times people who make this statement really want to understand—hoping we can prove to them otherwise. We can learn what is behind this statement by asking some questions. For example, we might say, “What specific errors and contradictions do you mean, Mr. Johnson?” When he answers, validate him where we can. “Oh, I can see why that would be confusing. It does seem like a contradiction, doesn’t it? Let me see if I can clarify it for you....”

Sometimes there are obscure passages that are difficult to understand. Someone once asked Mark Twain if it worried him that there were verses in the Bible that he did not understand. The great humorist replied, “No, it’s the verses I do understand that bother me!” Using humor, such as Mark Twain’s statement, can be an effective way to diffuse a person’s perspective on what s/he sees as errors in Scripture. God holds each person accountable for what s/he *does* understand.

3. “I had religion crammed down my throat as a child”

It is important to have compassion on those who have been wounded by being forced into a legalistic or rigid religious mold from childhood. Well-meaning folks force this kind of religious experience upon people—and it can be damaging and abusive.

The little children who came to Jesus did not feel religion was being forced upon them. They simply wanted to crawl up on His lap and listen to His stories and feel His love and concern for them. They wanted to be with Him—and He wanted to share His time with them, too. In fact, He told His disciples that to enter the kingdom of heaven, one needed to become like a little child (see Matthew 18:2-6; 19:13-14; Mark 10:13-36).

A person who believes his/her relationship with God means keeping a list of “Thou shalt nots” is unfamiliar with grace, the heart of Christianity. It will be important for us to be gentle with this person, as we explain the difference between religion and Christianity. Christ Jesus is a person, not a system of impossible laws. As our Redeemer, He brings people joy and peace, not frustration and bitterness.

4. “It doesn’t matter what religion you are, as long as you are sincere”

The person who says this probably works hard at being tolerant and accepting of others. We might tell this person the story of Wrong Way Corrigan. In 1939 Douglas Corrigan was on his way to California from New York in a battered aircraft with a faulty compass, no radio, no beam finder and no safety devices. He took off, and then, to the amazement of the ground crew, made a wide arc in his airplane and headed out over the Atlantic Ocean! For the next 24 hours he flew through thick fog, *sincerely* believing he was heading West. He realized his mistake when he looked down over Ireland and saw stone houses with thatched roofs and cobblestone streets! Now the truth is, the whole time he was flying East, Corrigan *sincerely* believed

he was flying West! Trouble is, he was *sincerely* wrong! The situation ended happily for him, but it could also have cost him his life.

Sincerity about religion is not the issue here, because religion is not the answer to life's problems. If it were, God would never have sacrificed His Son on Calvary. Religion is a man-made band-aid with no healing properties. And all the founders of the world's religions are all dead or dying. But Jesus is the living Redeemer. His Resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4) is evidence that He is the Son of God.

5. “Everyone has his own interpretation of what the Bible means; you can interpret it any way you like”

Here again, we can show our willingness to understand the person by asking a question: “How do you interpret the Bible, then Mrs. Wallace?” Listen carefully and avoid arguing with her about her understanding of Scripture. We might ask her how she interprets the passage in 2 Peter 1:20-21, where Peter explains, “No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation…”.

6. “I think I lead a pretty good life”

Remember, it is important not to discount or invalidate the person who is talking to us. We might respond with something like the following:

“You seem to be a warm and friendly person, Mr. Grant. I imagine that you have strong convictions and that you live by them. That’s rare in this age, isn’t it? But you know one of the ancient prophets of Israel made a discovery about that. Even though Isaiah was a godly man who obeyed God and lived a good life, when he was confronted with God’s goodness, he realized how far short of the mark of true goodness he was (Isaiah 6:5). And because God measures goodness against His perfect standard, Jesus Christ, you can’t depend upon your own goodness. The good news is, in Christ, Christians are seen as perfect, justified: ‘just-as-if they had never sinned!’”

7. “How can a loving God permit suffering?”

Of course, we know that mankind brings suffering upon himself or herself. Everyone lives in a world cursed by the Fall. Disease abounds. Accidents happen. Humans are free moral agents, permitted to live as they desire. God does not suspend His natural laws in order to override individual choices. But to a wounded person, either a patient in physical and emotional pain or his/her family, countering his/her question with such statements can seem harsh and cruel. The question, “How can a loving God permit suffering?” is often punctuated with grief, so be gentle in dealing with it.

According to the Bible, God is not impassively observing the suffering of His creatures, but He has personally entered into the suffering of humanity through the incarnation, and therefore is able to sympathize with our deepest pains (Hebrews 4:15-16). See Chapter 7 of Unit Two on “Understanding Suffering and Healing” for a fuller discussion of this issue.

We might respond with something like this: “I think your concern about suffering is an indication of your compassion, Mrs. Johnson. May I share one of the most tender stories in the Bible with you?” Tell one of the Biblical stories that show God’s concern for those who suffer. Then we can explain that God wants to redeem the pain of every person who suffers, and everyone suffers in one way or another. Here we can gently point out the truths mentioned in the first paragraph on this issue and then go on to explain that God will use that very suffering, if the person will let Him. For example, Hosea tells us: “In their affliction they will seek me early.”

8. “What about the poor natives in Africa who have never heard of God?”

It has been pointed out throughout this chapter that it is unkind to discount or to invalidate a person’s feelings or concerns. Never assume that this question is merely argumentative, although it could be. Instead, consider the value of taking the time to explore this person’s perspective.

Validate the question by saying something like, “That’s an excellent point, Mrs. Pauley. In fact, many people wonder about it. There once was a man whose name was Cornelius. He didn’t live in Africa, but....” Many people are willing to listen to a story, and the one about how God sent Peter to Cornelius shows clearly that if a soul thirsts after God, He will send His servant.

This might also be a good opportunity to explain that this is why we have given our life in ministry: to reach out as much as possible to people who may long to know God, but who have never yet heard His Good News.

9. “A clique runs the church”

Many people seem to have the feeling that only a handful of people are really involved in running the church. To a certain degree, that seems to be the sad truth. In many churches, only a few sweep the parking lot, only a few help with clean up after socials, only a few paint the classrooms, only a few sing in the choir, only a few teach Sunday School. This leads to fatigue, and that little band would probably be surprised to know that some people think they might not be wanted in that small group.

Recently the board members of the women’s fellowship at a neighborhood church decided to hand out questionnaires to all of the church women on a Sunday morning. They were amazed at the results. Many women of the congregation expressed a desire to serve, but said they had never been asked to help. The board members shook their heads in disbelief. Month after month they had longed for more hands to help them in the kitchen, in the nursery, and with the Sunday school. Somehow, communication had broken down. We can encourage the patient, when s/he is recovered, to consider volunteering his/her services even if no one has ever asked for his/her help. It may not be long before s/he is part of the “clique,” too!

10. “I have my own religion”

Sometimes people mean they already have a church when they make this statement. Sometimes it means they prefer to worship God in their own way. Whatever the meaning, we will have to ask some questions to fully understand what the person means, for example, “What religion is that, Mr. Irving?”

Helen, a new Christian, once said, “People are always coming to my door with cult tracts and I don’t know how to answer them. I’m afraid of them, I guess. So I just tell them I already have my own religion, and they usually go away.” Listening to understand the person earns us the privilege of sharing what we know. If the person is having problems similar to those Helen was experiencing, we can counsel the person to become involved in a Bible study.

If the person is merely trying to live a moral life based on what s/he thinks is good, then we can point out Proverbs 14:12: “There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof is the way to death.” Or we might want to point out that one of Israel’s most terrible time periods happened when “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6).

11. “All the church (preacher) ever talks about is money”

Money is an emotional issue with people. Some do not want to share anything they have and others feel guilty no matter how much they give away. Before we can decide how to minister to the person who makes this generalization, we will want to explore his/her thoughts by asking some questions, such as, “What do they say about money, Mrs. Burgess?”

If we have ever felt uncomfortable with emphasis on money in the church, we could say that we have felt that way, too. It is a sad thing that Christians need to be reminded to be generous when God has been so generous with them—and that they so readily forget that Jesus taught them to give so that they might not lose. Actually, Jesus talked a lot about money. Maybe that is why preachers talk so much about it, too.

We might want to say something like, “Mrs. Burgess, have you heard the old saying, ‘You can’t take it with you’? Well, the Bible tells us there’s a way to send it on ahead! Would you like to hear about that?” If invited, we can then share Jesus’ words from Matthew 6:19-21.

12. “Two things I never talk about, religion and politics”

Someone once made that statement to Mark Twain, who responded by saying, “That’s too bad, because these are the only things worth talking about.”

Of course, it’s important to respect a person’s right not to talk about these things and not to be pressed into a religious conversation. Jesus never imposed Himself or His views on anyone, and the Holy Spirit is kind and courteous. We should be, too. After all, in a healthcare setting, we are in a person’s “bedroom,” and it would be impolite to violate his/her privacy.

We may want to reassure the person, though, that we do respect his/her feelings. We might say, “I can appreciate that, Mr. Tidewater. Those two issues can be a source of argument and contention. As a matter of fact, I don’t really like to talk about religion or politics here in the hospital. But Jesus Christ is not a religion. He’s a person.” As in example #3, it will be important for us to be gentle with this person. If s/he is willing, we can explain the difference between religion and Christianity.

13. “I follow the Ten Commandments”

If someone told us that, we might respond with: “Mrs. Smith, I wonder where you get the power to do that? I know, for myself, I’ve never been able to do that. I’ve never committed murder, but Jesus said that being angry with my brother is the same as murder. And though I’ve not stolen money from anyone, if I’m late for an appointment, haven’t I robbed someone of his time?” It may be appropriate to share something personal here, but be careful not to turn the focus from the client to us.

Often a person will reply, “Well, I *try* to follow the Ten Commandments.”

It is generally a surprise to a person who tries to keep the Ten Commandments to discover that the Old Testament has more than six hundred laws. What James has to say is even more shocking: that whoever is able to keep the whole Law and yet stumbles on one point of it is guilty of breaking it all (James 2:10). Only Jesus was ever able to keep the Law perfectly, and it is only through Him that anyone can have access to God.

14. “The roof would fall in if I went to church!”

A person who makes this kind of statement generally has a good sense of humor and we can have a good laugh together. We might respond by saying something like, “Well, I know of a church that has a couple of good carpenters!” Don’t stay on the light side too long here, though, because behind this statement is an admission.

The person may be saying that s/he feels too guilty to go to church or to be accepted by God. Perhaps s/he used to be heavily involved and somehow wandered away. Or perhaps the person’s lifestyle seems so bad to him/her that s/he feels unredeemable. His/her unspoken question may very well be, “What would God say if I were to try to come back? Would He want me?”

Ask some questions. Be kind and gentle and reassuring. The easiest task in the world for God is to heal a guilty conscience. Here is a good opportunity to quote 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (NASB).

15. “I watch church on television; that’s enough for me”

It is important to let the person know we want to understand. Perhaps we can affirm some of the positive aspects of television ministries. For example, they provide teaching and music and prayer times for those

who are shut-in, unable to leave their homes because of physical impairment. Then we might want to ask some questions: "What do you like best about church on television? Does it help you when you feel lonely? Does it give you opportunity to show kindness to other Christians on a personal level? What about now, while you are here in the hospital? Do people from the television church bring food to your family at home, or will they help you out when you get home until you are on your feet?"

Explain that involvement can only be limited, at best, when a person limits church activities to passively watching television. The Bible says Christians are not to forsake gathering together regularly (Hebrews 10:24-25). Believers need each other—to sing and pray together, to counsel and encourage one another. Christians learn about themselves and about God when they spend time with other believers, having dialogue and sharing together.

16. "The only reason people go is to show off their fancy clothes"

This statement does not reflect an understanding of the more relaxed style that has come about in American churches since the days of the "Jesus Movement." There are many churches where jeans and T-shirts are just as appropriate as suits and ties. When a person makes a statement like this, it may be that something deeper than clothing is bothering him/her. Perhaps there is some financial difficulty, or a feeling of being unworthy. By asking gentle questions and making reassuring statements, we can discover how we can help ease the person's discomfort about going to church.

17. "I used to go to church. I just got out of the habit"

As in the case of #14, a person who makes this kind of statement is letting us know that s/he feels troubled about something that involves going back to church. Perhaps s/he used to be heavily involved and somehow wandered away. Maybe s/he was over-involved and suffered some kind of burnout. Ask some questions like, "What made you stop going? Did something happen that caused you some pain? Did you get overworked?" Be kind and gentle and reassuring. The easiest task in the world for God is to heal a guilty conscience.

18. "Those TV evangelists are all crooks"

This statement will probably become an increasingly common one. At the time of this writing, most major newspapers were carrying several stories each day, focusing on the problems of several well-known television evangelists. In some respects, there may be justification for a person's anger. But we can diffuse it by saying something like:

"I don't blame you for feeling angry. And, I think you may be right about some of them. It's hard to understand why some live in mansions while others are starving. But the Psalmist tells us not to fret because of evil-doers (Psalm 37), and the Bible says that everyone must stand before the judgment seat of Christ one day. Each person must give an account of his or her life. Did they spend their life to the glory of God, or to the glory of themselves? One thing I've come to realize is that you and I can't control what other people do. We can only control what we do, by looking to Christ in obedience."

19. "I am going to start back to church when I'm well"

Respond with, "How wonderful!" Then ask the person where s/he will be attending. If the person does not have a church in mind, ask him/her to identify the main cross streets near his/her home. Then tell the person about a good Bible-believing church in the neighborhood. If we don't know of any at that moment, tell him/her about one that is relatively close. If we don't know of one, we can get the person's home phone number and tell him/her we will call with the name of a church and Pastor. In any case, follow up by telephone several weeks later to see if s/he is going. This will help motivate the person.

20. "I can worship God just as well out in the wilderness"

It is true that the beautiful wilderness can move people to worship, to wonder, to awe. Psalm 19:1 says everyone can learn of the handiwork of the Lord by looking at the stars and the wilderness. Listen to the words of Psalm 8:1:

*Oh, Lord, our Lord,
How excellent is Your name in all the earth,
Who have set Your glory above the heavens!*

In Psalm 104 David describes God's great care over all that He has made. But in Psalm 95, after again rejoicing in the beauty of the creation, David solemnly warns against unbelief. It is from God's Word, special revelation, that people learn about the Lord Jesus and about how to enter into fellowship with God forever—not only on weekend trips or during vacations. It is in church that the Bible is taught.

21. **“That religious stuff is for women and children”**

By making such a statement, the person seems to be saying that men who claim to be Christians are weak. In a sense, we are being judged as weak (if we are a man). Examine our feelings. If we feel defensive and upset, it may be that we believe this statement might be true—and that is the message our body language and tone of voice will deliver to the person.

The truth of the matter is: we are weak! It is God's strength in us that empowers us (cf. Zechariah 4:6). Apart from Him, we are powerless. Owning our weakness is not to say that Christians are wimps. A look at the Roll Call of Faith in Hebrews 11, especially verses 36-40, reveals that!

But what can one say to the person who dismisses Christianity as a religion for women and children? Unfortunately, many men share that view. It is an attitude that has weakened this nation because men have abandoned their responsibility before God, who calls upon the husband and father to lead his family in worship. Imagine how our nation could be turned around if each man did this!

22. **“You don’t have to go to church seven days a week to be a Christian”**

Amen to that! Even Pastors don't go to church seven days a week. But it is important for Christians to meet together regularly (see #15).

23. **“Why don’t all the religions just get together?”**

On the surface, this may sound like a good idea. But who would decide which religion everyone should follow? It is also important to realize that all religions are *not* basically the same. The differences are critical! For example, all others are based on some system of works, either moral works or ritual works. But Christianity is based on faith, trust, confidence, and reliance that someone else did for us what we could not do for ourselves. In addition, religious beliefs are mutually exclusive. For example, when we die, we cannot go to heaven or hell (Christianity), be reincarnated (Eastern religions) and cease to exist (atheism) all at the same time. God cannot be impersonal (Eastern religions) and personal (monotheistic religions) at the same time. Either Christianity is correct and others are false, or others are true and Christianity is false. Either way, all religions cannot be true and blended together into one belief system.

The Bible does say that one day all the religions and nations of the world will join together—but it will not be to worship God, but to resist Him. Here, again, is another opportunity to explain the difference between religion and a relationship to God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

24. **“The only real hell is right here on earth”**

You might want to begin with, “It sounds like you've had a tough life. Do you want to tell me about it?” Then listen.

Yes, life on earth can be hellish, at times. But the Bible speaks of hell as a real place, far more terrible than we are able to imagine (See Matthew 25:46). God created it to be Satan's eternal dwelling place, though there are people who apparently choose hell over heaven. No person needs to fear hell, because God's word assures us that anyone who accepts Jesus Christ as Savior is promised eternal life in heaven (John 3:16).

25. "I follow the Golden Rule"

Here, again, the person is depending upon his/her own ability to live a life that is pleasing to God. Yet, Titus 3:5 tells us that no one can be saved by works of righteousness. Each of us must repent and depend only on Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. (See previous examples for further thoughts on grace versus works.)



Chapter Assignments

1. Make rounds and debrief with the Teaching Chaplain.
2. Write a verbatim and then schedule a peer group to evaluate it. Discuss your learning issues with your Teaching Chaplain.
3. Read an apologetics book and write a one-page summary report. Discuss what you learned and its implication for chaplaincy care at the bedside with your Teaching Chaplain
4. Spend several minutes in Bible study, reflection and prayer about how you make a defense for the Gospel in the healthcare setting without being offensive. Record your insights in a journal and discuss them with the Teaching Chaplain.
5. What would you say to the following people? Write out your responses and discuss them with the Teaching Chaplain.
 - a. Mr. Charmon states that he has witnessed an unhappy situation in a local church, and the people involved behaved in a way that seemed to Mr. Charmon to be the supreme hypocrisy.
 - b. Dr. Hendrickson is in the hospital recovering from surgery. He is a professor of philosophy at a local university. He has studied the Bible as literature and has compared it with other works. He seems to have a twinkle in his eye as he tells you that the Bible is full of errors and contradictions, and therefore much of it simply cannot be understood.
 - c. Mr. McIntosh has been wounded by being forced into a legalistic or rigid religious mold from childhood. His relationship with God has been a list of "Thou shalt nots," and it wasn't until he was away from home and in college before he felt he even had room to breathe. Even today at the age of 45, Mr. McIntosh feels that religion has been crammed down his throat, and he's had his fill.
 - d. Mrs. Amoz says, "I'm a sincere person. Why isn't being sincere about what we believe good enough for God? Why is God so intolerant?"
 - e. Mrs. Jones is a patient in the hospital, but it is a new role for her. Throughout her life she has been a model citizen. She is, in fact, the head of the hospital auxiliary, putting in hundreds of hours of volunteer work each year. She is also a philanthropist, making large financial contributions annually to a number of charitable organizations including those that help the poor, the ill and the homeless. Although she does not attend church, she believes in God, and in fact prays daily for other people. She has never asked Him for anything for herself, feeling

that such a thing would be both presumptuous and selfish. Now she has had a massive heart attack, and she cannot understand why God has done this to her.

- f. Mrs. Charles is a single parent, the recently widowed mother of a young child who has been struck by a car. The child is in intensive care, and the extent of her injuries is not yet known. Still grieving the death of her young husband to cancer a few months earlier, Mrs. Charles at first resists your attempts to talk with her, and then demands some answers of you. She asks, in an accusing tone, “How can a loving God permit such awful suffering? If He exists at all, why is He so greedy? Why has all this happened to the people she loves most?”
- g. Mr. Thomas says he believes in God all right. But he thinks you religious types are stuffy, talking about salvation and being lost and all. What about the poor natives in Africa who have never heard of God—at least the God you claim to represent?
- h. Mrs. Myers is a shy lady who keeps to herself. She’s given several churches a try from time to time, but always has the same experience. No one ever calls on her, even when she drops a note in the offering plate, volunteering to help. She’s noticed something, too: “After a while in any church, you get the feeling that only a handful of people are really involved in running it. In fact, a clique runs the church.”
- i. Mr. Edwards is a self-made man. He never finished college, but because of his inventive personality and hard work, he’s made it to an upper middle class lifestyle that suits him just fine. He quotes William Henley to you: “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.” “No, Padre,” he says, putting his hand to his chest, “This is my cathedral.”
- j. Mr. Michaels is recovering from surgery. When you stop by to visit, he seems to be waiting for you to introduce a specific topic. Whatever it is, you haven’t been able to do so, and finally he says, “Well, aren’t you going to ask me for a donation? Sooner or later, that’s all you church people want.”
- k. Mr. Schultz eyes you suspiciously when you enter his room. You introduce yourself and he says, “Well, I don’t mind you coming by, but there are two things I never talk about: religion and politics. Both of them are hitting the papers pretty strongly these days, but the way I see it, they are personal subjects.”
- l. Mr. DeAngelo is a construction worker who is hospitalized with a work-related injury. He explains to you that he knows everything that’s important in the Bible. He says, “I learned the 23rd Psalm as a boy and say it when I’m in trouble. I follow the Ten Commandments, and I’m a Good Samaritan whenever I can be. That’s good enough.”
- m. Mr. Marcus is a good-natured fellow in spite of his illness, but a bit rough around the edges. He teases you about smuggling him in “some of that Communion wine you guys use.” He then tells you, “If I went to church the roof would fall in!”
- n. Miss Smith is a young woman with an injury. She’s delighted to see you because she is a Christian. You ask her where she fellowships and who is her Pastor, and she says she doesn’t attend an organized church. Instead, she depends upon a religious television broadcast. “It has everything I need,” she explains.
- o. Mrs. McDaniel is a senior citizen in the hospital with foot surgery. She tells you that she doesn’t go to church, saying, “I can’t really afford to dress up. And besides, the only reason people go is to show off their fancy clothes and new hats.”
- p. Mr. Hanson says, “I’m in the hospital with a gall bladder problem, but it’s those TV evangelists that really made me sick! They’re all crooks, living in million-dollar mansions while babies starve and homeless people freeze to death on the streets every winter!”

- q. Mrs. Rodgers seems embarrassed that you have come to visit her. She's apologetic about her appearance, and then she tells you that she's been planning to get back to church. Maybe she'll do that when she's over this pneumonia, if she can find one that's near her neighborhood.
- r. Mr. Pauley has suffered a broken leg in a hiking accident. He tells you, "Even though it's risky to be out in the wilderness, there's such beauty there! That's where a person can really get in touch with his Maker!"
- s. Mr. McFee is a patient in the hospital. His wife attends church regularly with their children. Mr. McFee doesn't object to her going and taking their children, but he wants no part of it. He explains, "Church is supposed to be there for women and children. They're the emotional types who need it. Men don't."
- t. Mrs. Barker can't figure out why people have to be running to church every time the doors open. There are other things in life, aren't there?
- u. Mr. Garth says, "Everything is confusing with all the many religions in the world. Every country has its own religion and then, here in the United States, there's a different religion on every street corner. And read the religious page in the Saturday paper! There're more new ones every day! Why don't they all just get together and stop their quibbling?"
- v. Mr. Bronson says, "The problem with you religious types is that you're all worried about some kind of eternal punishment in the afterlife. The only real hell is right here on earth."
- w. A patient quickly tells you she knows some Christians who are not as kind and loving as the non-Christians she knows.
- x. As you visit with a patient, he tells you, "I've lived a good long life, Chaplain. I cannot ask for anything more than that. My mother taught me that all God asks of anyone is that we do our best and live a good life. I've done my best."
- y. As you enter a room to visit with a patient, he looks up at you. When you introduce yourself, he turns away, clicks on the television set, and refuses to answer you, no matter what you say to him.
- z. Two staff members tell of patients who have told them of having had a near-death experience. They express their amazement at how similar the details were despite the fact that the patients were far apart in time and place, and had different religious beliefs. The staff members admit they are becoming convinced of their reality. They ask, "Chaplain, what is your opinion of these occurrences?" What do you tell them?

6. Pastoral Theology Questions for Reflection. In the application process for becoming a Student Chaplain, you were asked for your doctrinal statement. Now take some time to reflect on how these beliefs may actually impact the chaplaincy care you provide at the bedside.

- a. What makes the Bible unique from all other religious scriptures? How do you communicate this truth to someone who believes their religious writings are also sacred?
- b. How has God revealed Himself to us? How does your understanding of this doctrine influence the use of the Bible in your ministry at the bedside?
- c. What does it mean when we call the Bible "inspired"? What impact does this conviction have upon how you share God's Word with unbelievers?
- d. What is the doctrine of "illumination"? What does your understanding of illumination have to do with ministering to people at their bedside?

- e. List the attributes of God and give a definition for each one. Also explain the practical implications of each attribute for your personal life. In addition, explain how each attribute may have personal implications for patients and how you would communicate this to an unbeliever.
- f. Give the reasons you believe Jesus is fully God and fully man. What are the practical implications of this truth for those to whom you minister?
- g. Explain the proof for why you are convinced that Jesus died and rose from the dead? Why is His death important? Why is His resurrection important?
- h. Who is the Holy Spirit and what is His ministry? Why is this important to your ministry?
- i. What are the implications if the account of the Creation and Fall of man are merely a “story”?
- j. What does it mean to be “created in the image of God”? How does this belief influence the way you minister to people from diverse backgrounds and cultures and religions?
- k. How do you define sin? What difference does it make how you define it? How is sin related to illness and wellness?
- l. What is the remedy for our sin problem? How is one saved? How would you explain the plan of salvation to someone without imposing your beliefs on them?
- m. Define salvation, redemption, justification, regeneration, reconciliation, and sanctification. Also give the practical implications of each for a believer’s life.
- n. What does it mean to be a “Christian”?
- o. What is the “church” and what is its mission? How does your role as a Chaplain fit into that mission?
- p. Explain how you will or will not cooperate with other faith traditions, especially the most prominent faith groups in your community.
- q. What is the kingdom of God? What does it have to do with chaplaincy care?

7. The following questions will help you gain insights into the way you view people with a worldview and beliefs that are different from your own. Be reflective and consider how each response might tend to influence (affect, shape, change) the visit and the direction of the chaplaincy care you provide. Write out your response to each question and then discuss them with the Teaching Chaplain.

- a. When I look at people with a different religious perspective, how do I feel about them? What do I consider first: someone created in the image of God, someone with different beliefs and practices, someone whose eternal destiny is unclear, or something else?
- b. When in dialogue with someone who holds to a different worldview and different beliefs, how do I engage them in dialogue? Do I tend to ask open-ended questions and focus on their views, or do I ask closed questions and lead the conversation in the direction I want it to go?
- c. Do I listen to their answers for the sake of fully understanding them and their perspective, or am I mostly thinking of my next response and changing their view?
- d. How do I show that I am actually interested in what they have to say about their views and my views?
- e. Do I start out thinking of points of similarity or points of dissimilarity between those of other faiths and myself?
- f. Do I think they have anything of value to share? Why or why not?

- g. Do I view their worldview and beliefs primarily from the standpoint of doctrinal claims (truth), religious symbolism and rituals, sacred literature, and/or experiences?
- h. How central is God's love and compassion revealed in Jesus to me (explicitly and/or implicitly) in terms of my conversation with them?
- i. How willing am I to be patient toward those of other faiths if they have misunderstandings of Christianity? How important to me is being empathic and long-suffering toward those of other faiths who express grievances and even hostilities toward Christianity?
- j. Would I be willing to go to hell if by doing so I could swap places with those people from other faith traditions (see Romans 9:1-5)? Why or why not?

Chapter Resources

The following annotated bibliography is not intended to be exhaustive in its content, nor does it contain all the latest resources. HCMA does not endorse all of the ideas expressed in all of the resources listed here. Some of the sources are given simply to expose the Trainee to a variety of viewpoints on the subject. It is expected that even in places of disagreement that we will reflect upon and think critically regarding our own views rather than simply dismissing views that run counter to our own.

Ankerberg, John, and John Weldon. *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*. Irvine, CA: Harvest House, 1996.

This comprehensive volume of in-depth information, comparisons to Christianity, and insights into New Age practices helps readers understand the New Age.

———. *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions: Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, Mind Sciences, Baha'i, Zen, Unitarianism*. Irvine, CA: Harvest House, 1999.

This book covers more than 50 cults and religions from A to Z. Includes an in-depth doctrinal appendix for further study, helpful charts, and a people/organization index.

Beckwith, Francis J., and Gregory Koukl. *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998.

An extremely well researched, intellectual approach to the problem of relativism and its effect on education, public policy, and our everyday lives.

Boa, Ken, and Larry Moody. *I'm Glad You Asked: In-depth Answers to Difficult Questions about Christianity*. Second ed. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013.

Everything your friends wanted to know about Christianity and you were afraid they'd ask. Explains the alternatives to the Christian position and then demonstrates why the Christian worldview is valid. It provides answers to the basic questions people ask and guides you logically through these questions with helpful flow charts. And it shows, most importantly, how each objection is really an opportunity to present the Gospel.

Boa, Kenneth D., and Robert M. Bowman, Jr. *20 Compelling Evidences that God Exists: Discover Why Believing in God Makes So Much Sense*. Tulsa, OK: RiverOak, 2002.

A resource that tackles the most profound arguments from philosophy, science, sociology, psychology, and history...and presents twenty clear, concise, and compelling evidences that show that faith in God—and specifically Jesus Christ—is reasonable.

Caner, Ergun Mehmet, and Emir Fethi Caner. *Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs*. Updated ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009.

An updated and expanded edition of a best-selling and award-winning book! Raised as Sunni Muslims, brothers Ergun and Emir Caner converted from Islam to Christianity as teenagers. Now respected evangelical scholars and theologians, the Caner brothers are able to present an inside view of the Muslim life from a Christian perspective.

Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry (CARM). www.carm.org.

This website is designed to equip Christians with the truth, to expose the error of false religious systems and evolution, to teach apologetics, help Christians defend the faith, and to glorify Jesus Christ.

Christian Research Institute (CRI). www.equip.org.

CRI exists to provide Christians worldwide with carefully researched information and well-reasoned answers that encourage them in their faith and equip them to intelligently represent it to people influenced by ideas and teachings that assault or undermine orthodox, biblical Christianity.

Crabb, Larry. *Finding God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995.

In today's world we are more preoccupied with solving our problems than with finding God. We've got things backward, says Dr. Larry Crabb. Instead of using God to solve our problems, we need to use our problems to find God.

Craig, William Lane. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. Third ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.

His approach—that of positive apologetics—gives careful attention to crucial questions and concerns, including: the relationship of faith and reason, the existence of God, the problems of historical knowledge and miracles, the personal claims of Christ, and the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. He shows that there is good reason to think Christianity is true. As Craig says, "If you have a sound and persuasive case for Christianity, you don't have to become an expert in comparative religions and Christian cults. A positive justification of the Christian faith automatically overwhelms all competing world views lacking an equally strong case."

Downs, Tim. *Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate With Those Outside the Christian Community...While We Still Can*. New ed. Chicago, IL: Moody, 1999.

In a world that's growing more hostile to the gospel, what can Christians do? How can we communicate with our unbelieving friends and coworkers in a way that won't seem pushy, intolerant, or judgmental? In a world that's heard it all before and no longer seems to care, where do we begin? By sowing. In *Finding Common Ground*, Tim Downs reminds us of the forgotten biblical art of sowing and shows us practical and effective ways to: Bring up spiritual subjects with busy and distracted people; Use secular movies and books to talk about biblical ideas; Overcome prejudice and stereotypes in our listeners; Keep open doors of communication with even hostile opponents; Move everyone we meet a step closer to the gospel.

Evans, C. Stephen. *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*. Revised ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996.

C. Stephen Evans has written a pointed and personal book directed to those who want to have faith but whose thinking has been obscured by the static of prevailing philosophies, illuminating the attraction and reasonableness of Christianity.

Geisler, Norman L., and Frank Turek. *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.

With conviction and clear thinking, Geisler and Turek guide readers through some of the traditional, tested arguments for the existence of a creator God. They move into an examination of the source of morality and the reliability of the New Testament accounts concerning Jesus. The final section of the book deals with a detailed investigation of the claims of Christ.

Geisler, Norman, and Ron Brooks. *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook on Christian Evidences*. Revised ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013.

Apologetics experts show readers how to answer objections to classic Christianity. Now revised and updated to address current issues and recent attacks on the faith.

Graham, Maurice. "The Role of the Chaplain with Religious Families Who Are Resistant to Treatment." *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 40.3 (1986): 273-75.

Green, Michael. *But Don't All Religions Lead to God?* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002.

In a conversational style geared toward nonbelievers, Green compares Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and other religions to help spiritual seekers navigate the multi-faith maze. It offers scriptural references, looks at how divergent religious traditions view salvation and eternity, and answers difficult questions such as "What about people who have never heard of Jesus?" and "How should Christians regard other religions?"

Halverson, Dean C. *The Compact Guide to World Religions*. Minneapolis: Bethany, 1996.

Succinct chapters provide an excellent guide to understanding Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Taoism, Shintoism, and more.

Heeren, Fred. *Show Me God: What the Message from Space Is Telling Us About God*. Second ed. DayStar, 2000.

In exclusive interviews, Stephen Hawking, NASA leaders, and Nobel prize-winning astronomers talk about how their discoveries have affected life's big questions. Topics include the creation and fine-tuning of the universe, the purpose of life, and the nature of God.

Hopfe, Lewis M., and Mark R. Woodward. *Religions of the World*. Twelfth ed. Cambridge: Pearson, 2011.

Closely edited for clarity and readability, and conceived for students with little or no background in the academic study of religions, the book offers the most up-to-date and historically accurate coverage of the world's major religions. It not only explains to students why it is imperative to study religions, but does this through the support of primary source documents, coverage of religions as they exist today, and integrated media resources.

Inch, Morris. *A Case for Christianity*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1997.

By surveying the historical beliefs of Christianity as well as the traditional arguments of its enemies, Morris Inch expresses profound truths in accessible style. Chapter by chapter, like a skillful lawyer, he presents the evidence and makes his case.

Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008.

Keller explains how the belief in a Christian God is, in fact, a sound and rational one. To true believers he offers a solid platform on which to stand against the backlash toward religion spawned by the Age of Skepticism. And to skeptics, atheists, and agnostics he provides a challenging argument for pursuing the reason for God.

Koehler, Edward W. A. *A Summary of Christian Doctrine: A Popular Presentation of the Teaching of the Bible*. Third ed. St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2006.

Its concise presentation of doctrine offers a unique introduction to the Lutheran Confessions for students of all ages. Now updated and based on the New King James Version, this classic statement of Lutheran doctrine explores all the major topics of Christian theology and offers university and seminary students a solid foundation for advanced study.

Koukl, Gregory. "Tactics in Defending the Faith" (audio). San Pedro, CA: Stand to Reason, 2000.

Kreeft, Peter, and Ronald K. Tacelli. *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994.

Reasonable, concise, witty and wise.

Laney, Carl. *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Find Him*. Waco, TX: Word, 1999.

Presents a practical path to life-changing encounters with the goodness, greatness and glory of our Creator.

Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan, 1943.

Provides an unequaled opportunity for believers and nonbelievers alike to hear this powerful apologetic for the Christian faith.

———. *The Case for Christianity*. Wheaton, IL: Nashville: B & H, 1997.

Adapted from BBC radio talks by C. S. Lewis on the Christian faith. Lewis discusses moral law and the issues of right and wrong.

Little, Paul E. *Know What You Believe*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008.

He presents ten bottom-line, non-negotiable truths of Christianity using humorous, anecdotal illustrations gathered from years of experience helping believers share their faith with not-yet Christians. Expanded and updated throughout by Paul's wife Marie, this contemporary edition is packed with illuminating answers to questions and misconceptions about the Christian faith, with study questions for each chapter.

———. *Know Why You Believe*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008.

Gives brightly understandable answers to questions about biblical Christianity. This edition, revised and updated by Marie Little in consultation with experts in science and archaeology, provides twenty-first-century information and offers solid ground for those who are willing to search for truth.

McCallum, Dennis, ed. *The Death of Truth: What's Wrong with Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason, and the New Postmodern Diversity*. Minneapolis: Bethany, 1996.

Enlightening, informative, and insightful.

McDowell, Josh, and Don Stewart. *Handbook of Today's Religions*. Nashville: T. Nelson, 1992.
This handbook provides authoritative, evangelical perspectives on alternative religions. It includes thorough, accurate information for analyzing and measuring these groups' claims and beliefs against God's Word.

McGrath, Alister E. *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths: Building Bridges to Faith Through Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993.
Shows convincingly that reason is only one of many possible points of contact between the non-Christian and the gospel.

Moreland, J. P. *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987.
Offers up-to-date arguments for God's existence and for Jesus' deity and resurrection, answers to objections to Christian theism, and discussions of four key issues.

Muck, Terry C., Harold A. Netland, and Gerald R. McDermott, eds. *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014.
"This handbook of religion is not simply a catalog of the religions of the world, or even of religions as such, but a conceptual framing of religions that engages the evangelical perspective without excluding other views. A novel feature is the inclusion of essays by practitioners of other religions and of cultural and ideological movements. Statistics and maps of the spread of religions make the handbook a useful resource for teaching and study."—Lamin Sanneh.

Nash, Ronald H. *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith*. Fourth ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994.
Christians should not have an inferiority complex regarding the academic or intellectual integrity of their faith and should understand that Christian faith is also a rational faith. Faith and Reason has two major purposes. First, it is designed to introduce readers to the more important questions that link philosophy and religion. It explores philosophical questions. It is also written for pastors, Christian workers, and educated laypeople who want to know how to defend the Christian faith. The book includes discussion questions.

Newman, Randy. *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did*. Sixth ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004.
Sharing Christ with unbelievers by using the probing, provocative, and penetrating method Jesus used to engage others in personal dialogue and caring interaction.

Nichols, Larry A., George A. Mather, and Alvin J. Schmidt. *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions*. Revised ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.
Up-to-date, well-documented, comprehensive coverage of cults, sects, and world religions, from the historical to the contemporary.

Okholm, Dennis L., and Timothy R. Phillips, eds. *Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.
Four perspectives are presented by their major proponents: **Normative Pluralism**: All ethical religions lead to God (John Hick); **Inclusivism**: Salvation is universally available, but is established by and leads to Christ (Clark Pinnock); **Salvation in Christ**: Agnosticism regarding those who haven't heard the gospel (Alister McGrath); **Salvation in Christ Alone**: Salvation depends on explicit personal faith in Jesus Christ alone (R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips).

Pinnock, Clark H. *Set Forth Your Case: An Examination of Christianity's Credentials*. Chicago: IL: Moody Press, 1971.
This text on Biblical apologetics provides critical, totally reliable, evidence for our historic Christian faith.

Posterski, Don. "Evangelism: Keeping Up in Our Changing World." *Decision* (May 1996): 10-12.

Rhodes, Ron. *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Catholics*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2000.
A thorough yet easy-to-use reference that covers many theological issues that divide Protestants and Catholics.

_____. *Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Jehovah's Witnesses*. Updated ed. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009.
Helps readers delve into the Bible and use practical tools to share God's truths with those who come calling.

Rhodes, Ron, and Marian Bodine. *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Mormons*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995.

Helps you understand the main points of Mormonism and discover where it falls short of God's truth.

Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth*. New ed. Chicago: Moody, 1999.

Within these pages, you'll find: A systematic overview of the Bible's major doctrines, including God, the Bible, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, the church, Satan, sin, salvation, man, angels, demons, events to come, and more; A glossary of theological terms; and a list of key Scripture passages for the study of theology.

Sproul, R. C. *Objections Answered*. Glendale, CA: Regal, 1978.

———. *Reason to Believe: A Response to Common Objections to Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982.

Deals with the most common objections to the truths of the Christian faith, including: * Has science disproved the existence of God? * Will non-Christians who never hear of Christ go to hell? * Is it narrow-minded and bigoted to believe Christ is only one way to God? * Why do people need God when life is going smoothly? * Isn't Christianity just a crutch for people who can't handle life's pressures? * Is heaven real or just "pie in the sky"? * Do Christians have a good answer to evil and suffering? * How does the church explain all its hypocrites?

Sproul, R. C., John H. Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley. *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984.

Must a person accept Christianity on faith alone, or is there a reasoned defense for being a Christian? The authors of this book hold that Christianity is eminently reasonable. The primacy of the mind in the Christian faith can be affirmed without denying the importance of the heart. This book embraces reason without rationalism, personal love without personalism, faith without fideism is our capacity to love Him. The book is divided into three parts. Section I is a prolegomenon dealing with the problems and methods of apologetics. Section II develops the theistic proofs and authority of Scripture. Section III is given over to a critique of presuppositionalism in apologetics, particularly with reference to the thought of Cornelius Van Til.

Stand to Reason. www.str.org.

Stand to Reason trains Christians to think more clearly about their faith and to make an even-handed, incisive, yet gracious defense for classical Christianity and classical Christian values in the public square.

Strobel, Lee. *The Case for a Creator: A Journalist Investigates Scientific Evidence That Points Toward God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004.

Join Strobel as he reexamines the theories that once led him away from God. Through his compelling account, you'll encounter the mind-stretching discoveries from cosmology, cellular biology, DNA research, astronomy, physics, and human consciousness that present astonishing evidence.

———. *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998.

It's a riveting quest for the truth about history's most compelling figure.

———. *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000.

Strobel turns his skills to the most persistent emotional objections to belief—the eight "heart barriers" to faith.

Swindoll, Charles R. *Growing Deep: Exploring the Roots of Our Faith*. Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986.

Offers a panoramic overview of the best riches of our biblical heritage and provides the right foundations for a faith that won't fold, a serenity that isn't shallow, and a joy you can't leave behind.

Wilson, Bill. *A Ready Defense: The Best of Josh McDowell*. Nashville: T. Nelson, 1993.

Timely and biblically based, Josh McDowell's work offers defenses in 60 of the most-challenged areas of faith. All in one easy-to-reference volume, this book will strengthen your commitment and help you stand firm against challenges to the truth.

Zacharias, Ravi. *Can Man Live Without God*. Nashville: W Publishing, 1996.

In this brilliant and compelling defense of the Christian faith, Ravi Zacharias shows how affirming the reality of God's existence matters urgently in our everyday lives. According to Zacharias, how you answer the questions of God's existence will impact your relationship with others, your commitment to integrity, your attitude toward morality, and your perception of truth.

—. *The Lotus and the Cross: Jesus Talks with Buddha*. Portland, OR: Multnomah, 2002.

Have you ever wondered what Jesus would say to Mohammed? Or Buddha? Or Oscar Wilde? Maybe you have a friend who practices another religion or admires a more contemporary figure. Drop in on a conversation between Jesus and some well-known individuals whose search for the meaning of life took them in many directions -- and influenced millions. Popular scholar Ravi Zacharias sets a captivating scene in this first in the intriguing Conversations with Jesus books. Through dialogue between Christ and Gautama Buddha that reveals Jesus' warm, impassioned concern for all people, God's true nature is explored. It's a well-priced, hard cover volume readers will want to own, and also share with others.

Appendix A

Best (and Worst) Practices for Communicating with Non-Christians⁴

By Tim Downs

Article Summary: With wit and wisdom, this article offers five powerful approaches to becoming more persuasive with non-Christians: Speak the Unbeliever's Language, Show an Understanding of the Unbeliever's World, Be Intelligent and Credible, Use Tools That Raise Good Questions, and Have a Reasonable Persuasive Goal.

I remember visiting a Christian bookstore once—I use the word bookstore loosely because in reality more than half the store was devoted to music, posters, and an astounding variety of what I call “Protestant Paraphernalia.” I was amazed to find an entire section devoted to T-shirts, lapel pins, and bumper stickers. One stylish crew neck featured a drawing of a plump pink human brain with the caption, “This is your brain.” Below it was a drawing of the same brain sitting in a frying pan. The caption: “This is your brain in hell.” A jet-black Beefy-T featured the subtle invitation, “Heaven or Hell, turn or burn.” Still another was emblazoned with the warm reassurance, “Every knee shall bow—count on it.” Every pin, shirt, poster and sticker was a stark, screaming, in your face confrontation with the unbelieving world. “This is how it is,” they all seemed to say. “Like it or lump it, baby.” Above this remarkable display was a banner that read “Witness Center.”

Until I saw that banner, it had not occurred to me that these pins, shirts and bumper stickers were much more than some Christian’s concept of art—they represented some Christian’s concept of the best way to witness to an unbeliever. I have a brother-in-law who is a senior vice president for a large advertising agency in Chicago. I asked him once about how an especially obnoxious television commercial for a local car dealer managed to stay on the air. “What’s the name of the dealer?” he asked. When I told him, he replied, “That’s why it stays on the air. You remember the name.”

In advertising, the assumption is made that people are busy, distracted and essentially immune to the thousands of messages that bombard them each day. If an advertisement can just shout loud enough, just assault the senses long enough, then the message might get through. Christians often work under the same

⁴ From *Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community...While We Still Can* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1999). Used by permission. Tim Downs is the founder of the Communication Center, a communication training and consulting ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ.

assumption. If we can reach the unbeliever's eye, if we can make him pay attention for a moment, the message just might get through.

But what message gets through? When a man is slapped in the face, it's only in commercials that he responds, "Thanks. I needed that." In the real world, he's very likely to slap you back.

Christians everywhere walk around adorned with slogans and clichés that appear blunt, angry, self-righteous, and confrontational to the average unbeliever. The message gets through—the message that Christians are rude, arrogant and judgmental. So the question is what kind of T-shirt do you wear around someone who's still deciding whether to follow Christ?

This issue is a critical one, and the problem is not restricted to Christian T-shirts and bumper stickers. It's also a problem with Christian books, magazines, television shows, movies, and our dialogue with unbelievers generally. It's a problem with our entire witnessing strategy. What should that strategy entail instead? Here are five guidelines for communicating with unbelievers.

Speak the Unbeliever's Language

Our planet has hundreds of distinct languages, each incomprehensible to the person who lives just across the border. Nothing is as frustrating as trying to communicate with someone who has no vocabulary in common with us. "Those French people!" Steve Martin once complained, "It's like they have a different word for everything!" To the ancient Greeks, foreigners sounded like they were just mumbling nonsense—something like "barbarbarbarbar." That's the origin of the word barbarian. The modern definition of the word is "an insensitive, uncultured person; a boor." Originally, it simply meant "someone who doesn't speak your language." I imagine it was a small step from the first definition to the second.

One of the unique languages of our planet is Christianese. It's really a blending of several other dialects, including ancient Greek and Hebrew, King James English, and pop psychobabble. Here is just a brief excerpt from the elementary Christianese lexicon: saved, justified, sanctified, glorified, heathen, witness, gospel, Spirit-filled, raptured.

This is basic vocabulary, of course. The advanced lexicon includes terms like premillennial and dispensationalist. We even have Christianese secret codes to learn, like 666 and WWJD.

This is the Christian's native tongue. But how does it sound to the unbeliever when we attempt to communicate to him in this mysterious language? We sound like barbarians in the fully modern sense of the word. Because we don't take the time to speak and write in a way the non-Christian can understand, we appear as insensitive and uncultured boors. Those Christians—it's like they have a different word for everything.

As Christians we are essentially translators. Our job is to take complex theological principles, first recorded in ancient Near Eastern texts, and express them in terms so simple and clear that the most uneducated modern listener can understand them. Translation takes time, and it requires the knowledge of at least two languages: the language of your original text and the language of your listener. A truly effective translation is faithful to both.

Show an Understanding of the Unbeliever's World

I have a friend who is in graduate school at a state university. In his department, the belief that homosexuality is the moral equivalent of heterosexuality is so entrenched that it is absolutely non-negotiable. As he puts it, "In my department, to argue that homosexuality is a sin would be no different than to argue that blacks are really inferior to whites." Knowledge of this mind-set is very helpful to my friend—and an ignorance of that mind-set would be disastrous for any Christian who assumed otherwise. An unbeliever's world can be radically different from our own. Instead of attempting to persuade unbelievers about details of biblical morality—which should be the result of salvation, not a prerequisite for it—a wiser Christian takes the time to find out exactly how our worlds are different before charging ahead.

James Davidson Hunter, in his book *Culture Wars*, wrote that communities that share firmly held beliefs—like Christians—need to try to understand what other communities hold dear. We need to try to recognize “the ‘sacred’ within different moral communities. The ‘sacred’ is that which communities love and revere as nothing else. The ‘sacred’ expresses that which is nonnegotiable and defines the limits of what they will tolerate.” In other words, Christians are not the only ones who hold things sacred, and an affront to the deeply held beliefs of others—whether about homosexuality, feminism, or radical environmentalism—is seen by them as not just offensive, but sacrilegious. We do not have to agree with another person’s point of view in order to respect that person and avoid obvious offense. Hunter warns us not to be “idiots,” which comes from the Greek prefix *idios*, meaning personal, private, or separate. A true idiot, in the original sense of the word, was a person so private and withdrawn that he had no idea how to speak or act.

What is your listener’s religious and cultural background? What community does she consider herself a part of? What stereotypes or caricatures would she find particularly offensive? What agreements have you assumed between you and your listener that may actually be points of difference? You can avoid the particular form of idiocy common to Christians if you will take the time to understand her listener’s world.

Be Intelligent and Credible

In public restrooms I have sometimes found Christian tracts that believers have left—not simple summaries of the gospel like *The Roman Road* or *The Bridge*, but tracts that attempt to deal with a complex contemporary issue such as evolution, feminism, homosexuality, or AIDS. In one tract on evolution, Darwin’s basic theory was portrayed in such simplistic terms that no evolutionist on earth would recognize it. The theory was then neatly “refuted,” and the Christians won in the end. This kind of argument is known as a “straw man.” We set up a straw man—a flimsy facsimile of a real argument—and then we knock it down. This is a common inhouse exercise for Christians, and it gives us a temporary sense of confidence and superiority; but God help you if you ever run into the real argument.

My son will enter college soon—probably a large, secular university. There, for the first time, he will encounter some of the real arguments. It will be a vulnerable time for him. Many young Christians abandon their faith during their college years, for a variety of reasons. One of those reasons is that they were never prepared to resist an effective argument made by a knowledgeable, intelligent, persuasive professor. When the genuine item comes along, the young Christian is swept away. He may end up angry and bitter, feeling that he was misinformed, misled, or even deceived by his Christian mentors.

Sometimes we unintentionally cheat younger Christians by exposing them only to imitations of challenges to the Christian faith, versions that are easy to defeat because they bear little resemblance to the real disease. My wife and I are working now to try to “inoculate” our son. In medicine, inoculation involves introducing a controlled amount of disease into the patient’s body. The patient’s immune system detects the new disease and begins to develop antibodies to resist it. By the time the real disease comes along, the patient has sufficient immunity to resist it. But here’s the key: The inoculation must contain a sample of the real disease.

One of the ways we hope to prepare our son to face the real arguments is by admitting honestly that the other side is not stupid. We simply believe they are mistaken, and sometimes very intelligent people make mistakes. By refusing to ridicule or caricature opposing views, we hope to teach our son to approach opponents with respect. As Peter put it, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15b).

So we should address unbelievers as intelligent, thoughtful adults and we should deal with their positions gently and respectfully. This means that Christian speakers and authors who want to create materials that Christians can recommend had better do their homework. They need to take the time to intimately understand an opposing view from original sources – in other words, they need to have the courage to expose themselves to the real disease in its most virulent form.

Then, they need to formulate intelligent and well-thought-out responses. Even if the unbeliever disagrees, as long as he feels that his position was handled fairly and respectfully, he'll remain open to further input from us.

Use Tools That Raise Good Questions

There is a difference between communication that is suited for sowing and that which is better or harvesting. Harvesting entails giving answers, being up-front, direct, and thorough. Although it may address a topic other than the gospel, it will always come around to the topic of the gospel itself, and it usually attempts to bring the unbeliever to a point of decision. For the harvester, if the book, movie or discussion doesn't give the whole answer, it's of no value.

Sowing, on the other hand, entails asking questions. For the sower, any book, tape, film or discussion that raises questions that the sower can make use of in his ongoing contact with the unbeliever is of great value. That's one of the biggest differences between a harvesting and sowing tool: A harvesting tool does all the work for you. "Here—read this and become a Christian." But a sowing tool still leaves the sower with most of the work. "Here—read this and tell me what you think." It raises a good question, creates a deeper interest, or provides an opening for an intimate conversation.

This is the radical claim I am putting forth: Because sowing is a legitimate, God-ordained form of ministry, materials and discussions that help us sow are valuable ministry tools—if only we will learn how to recognize and use them. And the wonderful thing about sowing tools is that the secular world is making them for us.

Chuck Colson once said that he learned more about the true nature of sin by watching Woody Allen's movie *Crimes and Misdemeanors* than from any doctrinal treatise he ever read. The movie is about an eminent ophthalmologist, a well-respected family man, who has a brief affair with a lonely flight attendant. The flight attendant becomes increasingly jealous and threatens to reveal the affair to the doctor's wife. In a panic, the doctor turns to his brother, who has the woman murdered. The rest of the movie is about the doctor's attempt to rationalize his terrible sin in his own mind. He tells himself that the woman was an enemy, threatening to destroy his marriage, his family, and his reputation. What choice did he have but to defend himself? By the end of the film, he had fully rationalized his sin, and he lives happily ever after.

Imagine that you and your neighbor both see this film. Afterward, some very natural interaction about the movie might include questions like these:

- Can you believe the way the doctor rationalized what he did?
- How do you feel about the fact that he got away with it in the end?
- Do you think he really got away with it?
- Do you suppose he would ever again think about what he did?
- What do you think Woody Allen was saying about human nature?

Simple questions like these could lead to some very direct conversation about biblical topics like sin, confession, and repentance. As you grow in skill and experience, you'll realize that you can make use of an incredible variety of books, tapes, music, and films that can be found at any bookstore or video outlet. Instead of trying to figure out how to get the unbeliever to come over to your world and watch your movie, you can learn to make use of the movies from his world that he's most likely to see.

Have a Reasonable Persuasive Goal

John Warwick Montgomery tells the story of an eager Christian who was witnessing to his scientifically-minded friend. Their conversation was stalled over the issue of evolution; according to the unbeliever, there simply isn't enough evidence in the geologic record to support the biblical account of

creation. Undaunted, the Christian replied, “Now what was that book I heard about that refutes all of geology?”

Some Christians believe that such a book is possible. They fail to understand that modern geology, and virtually every other academic discipline, is supported by a mammoth amount of study, research, and writing. Any attempt to refute in one swoop such a massive amount of scholarship displays ignorance of the field and loses credibility in the eyes of the unbeliever.

“You must be kidding—it’s not that simple.”

That’s why it’s important for Christians not to bite off more than they can chew when appealing to unbelievers. I once heard a tape by a Christian with a Ph.D. in chemistry. He was examining the big bang theory of the origin of the universe, questioning whether such an event could have happened without some external guidance. He was an active scientist with a credible degree from a respected university, and his arguments were impressive—his only problem was the extent of his persuasive goal. In a one-hour tape he went from flaws in the big bang theory to the biblical account of creation to the New Testament teaching that “in Him all things hold together.” The farther he went, the more his argument seemed to unravel; it was just too much to cover in an hour.

One exciting application of the principle of “small bites” is the number of respected scientists who are now writing on design theory. To put it simply, design theory is creation science with a more reasonable persuasive goal. Design theorists argue that, when you consider the existence and nature of the universe, it seems as though some kind of intelligent design was necessary to produce it. They are not arguing that it must have been the biblical God, or that the Genesis account of creation must be true. They are arguing one small point—but that small point is enough to upend the theory of evolution.

These scientists have realized that within the scientific community, they would be deadlocked forever debating the larger issue of “creation science” and whether it even exists. There is no way to move their colleagues from the position of scientific naturalism all the way to Christian atheism in a single step—so they have decided to sow. Their more limited persuasive goal is much more attainable, and the writings they’re producing are intelligent, credible, and persuasive—exactly what you might be looking for.

Appendix B

Stop Answering Questions: The Right Questions Can Open the Door to Spiritual Dialogue

By Randy Newman⁵

I like answering questions with questions. Maybe it's because I'm Jewish. I grew up with dialogues that went like this:

Me: How's the weather down there?

Granny Belle: How could the weather be in Florida in the middle of July?

Me: So, how have you been?

Uncle Nat: Why do you ask?

Me: How's your family?

Aunt Vivian: Compared to whom?

I'd like to think I answer questions with questions because I'm trying to follow the example of Jesus. Isn't it uncanny how often our Lord answered a question with a question?

When a rich man asked Him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded, "Why do you call me good?" (Mk. 10:17–18). When religious leaders asked if it was right to pay taxes, Jesus asked whose portrait was on the coin (Mt. 22:17–20). When the Pharisees were "looking for a reason to accuse Jesus," they asked, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" Jesus' response was a question: "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?" (Mt. 12:9–12).

But the most likely reason for my use of questions is that I'm tired. After years of answering nonbelievers, I'm simply tired of realizing that an answer is not what they really want.

There have been times (far too many, I'm afraid) when I have given what I knew was a biblically accurate, logically sound, epistemologically watertight answer—only to see the questioner shrug his shoulders. Instead of moving him closer to salvation, my answer pushed him further away. Rather than engaging his mind or urging him to consider an alternate perspective, it gave him ammunition for future attacks against the gospel.

So, I've started answering questions with questions and have gotten far better results.

Stealing Thunder

There was the time that a team of skeptics confronted me at our weekly Bible study for freshmen guys. The host of the study, in whose dorm room we were meeting, had been telling us for weeks of his roommate's antagonistic questions. This week, the roommate was there—along with a handful of like-minded friends.

The inevitable question arose, more as an attack than a sincere inquiry. "So, I suppose you think that people who don't agree with you, like all those sincere followers of other religions, are going to hell!"

⁵ Randy Newman is the Washington, D.C. director for research and development for Campus Crusade for Christ. He is affiliated with the Academic Initiative, which seeks to increase the prominence of the Christian worldview in all academic disciplines. Randy also writes a weekly internet column for Christians in academia, which can be found at www.ai.ccm.org/menus/grads.

“Do you believe in hell?” I responded.

My antagonist had probably never seriously considered the possibility of hell. He looked puzzled, perhaps because he was being challenged when he thought he was the one doing the challenging. Finally, after a long silence, he said, “No, I don’t believe in hell. I think it’s ridiculous.” I chose to echo his word choice. “Then why are you asking me such a ridiculous question?”

I wasn’t trying to be a wise guy. I simply wanted him to face honestly the assumptions behind his own question. His expression seemed to indicate that I had a good point.

The silence was broken by another questioner: “Well, I do believe in hell. Do you think everyone who disagrees with you is going there?”

Again I questioned. “Do you think anyone goes there? Is Hitler in hell?” (Hitler has turned out to be a quite helpful—though unlikely—ally in these kinds of discussions).

“Of course, Hitler’s in hell.”

“How do you think God decides who goes to heaven and who goes to hell? Does He grade on a curve?”

From there, the discussion became civil for the first time, and serious interaction about God’s holiness, humanity’s sinfulness, and Jesus’ atoning work ensued. Answering with questions turned out to be an effective, albeit indirect, way to share the gospel.

Another time questioning worked better than answering was a lunch-time conversation with a philosophy professor who was an atheist. He served as the faculty advisor for the campus philosophy club; I was a campus minister for Campus Crusade for Christ. We had cosponsored a debate about the problem of evil and were meeting to evaluate how the event had gone. After discussing how we could have publicized the event better and what topics we could address in future forums, I asked his opinion about the content of the debate.

I knew I was in way over my head; nothing I could say about the Christian view of evil could top what the brilliant philosophers had said the night before. But I wanted to see if I could get the conversation out of the philosophical realm and into the personal one. I was concerned for this man’s soul.

He told me he still thought Christians failed to present a decent answer for the problem of evil. So I posed the question to him, “What is your atheistic explanation for why terrible things happen?”

He paused and then said softly, “I don’t have one.”

I told him this wasn’t just an academic issue for me. As someone who is Jewish, I have had to wrestle with the reality of the holocaust. I recounted my latest visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and how emotionally difficult it was. I again asked him if there was an atheistic way to make sense of such things as the Nazis’ slaughter of six million of my people.

Again, his answer was a nonanswer.

I told him that the Christian answer to the problem of evil may have its shortcomings. While I am not totally satisfied—either intellectually or emotionally—with what the Bible says about such things, my incomplete answer was better than no answer at all. The rest of our lunchtime was a good, respectful conversation that moved us closer to each other and—I hope—moved him closer to seeing some flaws in his worldview.

Questions Have Their Advantages

Answering a question with a question has some significant advantages over the use of direct answers. As we’ve seen, it brings the questioner’s assumptions to the surface. It also takes the pressure off you, the one being asked, and puts the pressure on the one doing the asking. As long as we are on the defensive, the questioners are not really wrestling with issues. They’re just watching us sweat.

For example, the chief priests and the teachers of the law challenged Jesus with this inquiry: “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things. Who gave you this authority?” His response was a question, “Tell me, John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men?” After a short retreat for time to maneuver, they told Him they didn’t know the answer. Jesus showed them that their insincere question deserved a nonanswer by declaring, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things” (Lk. 20:1–8).

In reality, the teachers’ question was simply an attack posing as a question. Answering these attacks with questions not only takes the heat off us and deflects it to the other person, it also tones down hostility. People usually don’t like such temperature changes and will adjust the attack thermostat accordingly.

Answering a question with a question also paves the way for a response that might not otherwise be received. When I asked my dormitory interrogators if they believed in hell, I prepared them to think about the concept of divine judgment. Many ideas that are central to our gospel message—God’s holiness, humanity’s sinfulness, and Christ’s atonement—are alien concepts for people today. Questions bring these ideas into clearer focus for them to consider and even accept.

Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well (Jn. 4:1–26) fits this pattern. The woman’s notions of righteousness, sin, and worship needed to be challenged before she would accept Jesus’ way of seeing those topics. Without His questions, it is doubtful she would have gotten to the point of saving faith.

To be sure, there are times when a direct answer is preferable, particularly when the questioner is sincere and would benefit from a clear, biblical explanation. There were quite a few times when Jesus didn’t beat around the bush. His direct answer to the teacher of the law who asked which was the most important commandment is just such an example (Mk. 12:28–31).

Yet often we need to hold back our answer and initiate genuine dialog with a question. When your coworker asks you—with an accusatory tone—why you still believe in God in light of all the people dying of AIDS, ask him how he explains such a horrible tragedy.

When your cousin asks you why you’re so narrow-minded as to think that all those Buddhists are going to hell, ask her if she’s become a Buddhist. Or see if she’s studied Buddhism enough to convince her that its adherents are worthy of heaven.

When your neighbor asks you why you think Jesus is anything more than just a good moral teacher, don’t take out your “Lord, liar, lunatic” explanation just yet. Ask him why he thinks Jesus was a good teacher. Has he read a lot of Jesus’ teachings? Which messages impress him the most about Jesus’ teaching ability? What would he say was the main message Jesus taught?

Recently, I heard a pastor urge his congregation to challenge the prevailing slogans of our day. The next time they heard someone quote, “Image is everything!” he told them they should respond, “No, it’s not! The glory of God is everything!”

While I agree with his theology, I think his methodology may be flawed. I think it would be better to respond with a puzzled look and a one-word question: “Really?” A follow-up question could be “Do you really believe that?” I think many people would see the point.

Then, a few gospel-paving questions could be added: “What do you think is everything? What would you say is the most foundational thing in life?”

Our message is too important for it to continue to fall upon deaf ears. Our good news is too good to be ignored. Our answers really are what people need to hear if we could just get them to listen. The Apostle Peter was surely right in imploring us to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet. 3:15). I would just want to follow Jesus’ method of doing so by answering a question with a question.

On Your Own

1. Read 2 Tim. 2:23–26. What are we to do instead of engaging in foolish arguments?
2. How should we treat our questioners? (v. 24)
3. In these discussions, what is God’s portion? (vv. 25–26)
4. What dialogue-opening question could you ask in the following situations? Recruit a friend and practice having one of these conversations.
 - A [staff person] finds out you’re a Christian and asks, “Why are you Christians so intolerant of anyone who doesn’t agree with you?”
 - A nonbelieving coworker has a “God Bless America” sign on her cubicle.