

# Stop Answering Questions

The right questions can open the door to spiritual dialogue.

by Randy Newman

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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.

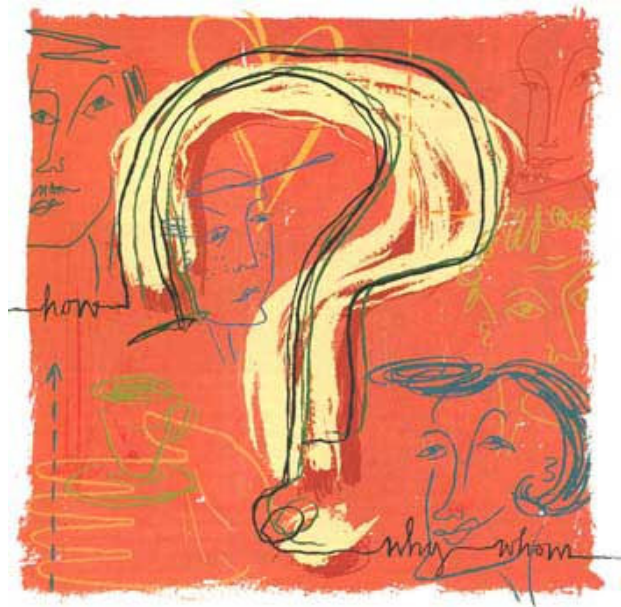


Illustration by Jo Tronc

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!"

"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.

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#### About the author:

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#### Try it Out

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 fellow student 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.

