

Using questions to help others come to faith in Christ

Dennis Williams – October 2008

The Navigators U.S. Metro Ministries - Detroit

Recently I asked a friend if he was regularly talking to others about their faith in God. He told me that he was not doing it because he was afraid that he would not have the answers for questions that may come up. Have you ever felt unqualified or trapped by this same line of thinking? If so, I have good news for you. You don't have to give answers, just ask questions! Let me explain...

Evangelism is much more than giving people information or the right answers. Evangelism is most effective when we get people to think about something they have never thought about before, when we leave them intrigued and wondering what the answer is.

Becky Pippert, in her book "Out of the Salt Shaker", says that good evangelism is 60% asking questions, 30% building intrigue, and 10% sharing. We get that turned around and think evangelism is mostly sharing, telling, answering. Ask questions to get to know the person and get them thinking about issues. Build intrigue with third party stories and with follow-up/deeper questions in the discussion. Share the joy of your own discovery and God's Word in small doses (seed size sharing), followed-up again with a question..."Have you ever heard a story like that before?" "What do you think that Bible verse means?"

The most powerful thing we have to share is the joy of our own discovery, how Christ Himself has impacted our lives...that is what a witness is, witnessing to what we have seen and experienced ourselves. But when it comes to discussion, questions are more powerful than statements, because it forces a person to think and answer and discuss along the lines of the question rather than along the lines of their pre-set arguments. They have to think, and think about things they have never thought about before. That is the power of questions.

Giving people information and answers will not bring them to Christ (unless their hearts are ready to respond to truth), contrary to modern thinking about witnessing and evangelism. Engaging their minds and hearts to think about real life issues on a deeper level, what is truth, and what are the consequences of various ideologies of life, is what begins to form cracks in their thinking where the Holy Spirit can cause seeds of truth to grow and eventually guide them into truth.

Questions are one of the strongest evangelistic tools we have. Let me give you two examples from the life of Christ (there are more...read through the New Testament sometime and look how Jesus used questions).

In Luke 10:25-37, a lawyer came up to Jesus and asked him "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Would you debate a lawyer or try to give him an answer? Instead of getting into a discussion, Jesus simply asked him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" The lawyer's own answer backed him into a corner. Jesus never once made a statement or tried to give an answer. He simply asked a question, told a story and asked a question at the end as to the moral of the story. The questions forced the lawyer to give answers himself and to deal with the real issues at hand.

In Mark 10:17-19, a man ran up to Jesus and asked him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus didn't start by trying to give him an answer, but started with a question that jotted the man's thinking... "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God Himself." We often start with trying to give an answer, rather than starting with asking a question, or a series of questions.

I've also learned that I can present the whole gospel by simply asking questions about one verse – Romans 6:23 – “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Read over or quote the verse with someone, then start asking questions about what they think the different words and concepts in the verse mean to them. It's powerful to watch the Holy Spirit guide them into truth as you just ask questions. Look at the sheet entitled “**Questions to help someone think more deeply about a Bible verse**” that is at the end of this printout. It will give you some ideas on how to do this.

When asking a question, remember that often you don't have to say anything, just listen. Simply leave them with the question, and let the Holy Spirit do the work from there.

Ask God to give you ideas on the type of questions to ask, and keep a list. The Lord Jesus Christ said that He would make us fishers of men (Matthew 4:19)...trust Him to do that. Questions are like fish bait...they attract men & women to truth. **Those who ask questions find doors opening for them.**

I hope this helps to get you started. Contact me if I can be of any help.

For more information, contact:

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Examples of questions I often use

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1. There is an American idiom “Have a good day.” What do you do when you don’t have a good day? (I use this one a lot when people say to me, “Have a good day.”) I like to follow this with a second question...”Do you ever think about prayer or asking God to help you?”
2. Looking at all the relationships you have in life, is there someone that you would say really loves you? (Be a little gentle with this one...it can touch open hurts in people’s hearts)
3. All of us do things in life that we know are wrong, then we feel guilt or shame. What do you do when you do something you know is wrong, when you feel guilt or shame? How do you handle it?
4. Do you think that it is possible for a person to know God personally as a friend?
5. If someone came up to you and said, “Denny, how can I have a personal relationship with God that really makes a difference in my life?”, what would you say to them?
6. Has there ever been a time when you felt God was close to you, or that you had some type of very real encounter with God?
7. All of us have various times when we are fearful in life. What do you do what you have fear that keeps you from doing what you’d like to do?
8. All of us have areas in life where we would like to see change, but feel powerless to do anything about it. What do you do when that happens?
9. (Question I asked several people at a college volunteer recruiting fair)... “Both you and I are volunteers, trying to do some good in each of our organizations. What is it that makes a person want to do good, to serve others?”
10. (Question I asked several of our neighbors when one of our fellow neighbors died)... “I was sad to lose Jerry...he was a good neighbor. Do you ever think much about God or death or eternal life?”
11. (Question I like to use 6 weeks before Christmas and Easter)... “Have you ever read the real Christmas (Easter) story out of the Bible?” Follow-up question...”Do you believe in Christmas (Easter)?”
12. (Question I like to ask the month before Halloween)... “Halloween is coming up in a few days. Do you think there is a real devil, a real Satan, in this world?”
13. (Question I like to ask before Thanksgiving)... “Thanksgiving is coming up in a few weeks. Do you normally take time to give thanks on Thanksgiving? If you do, who do you give thanks to?”

"Let Me Ask You Something"

Asking questions is often the best way to connect with those who do not yet know Christ.

By Becky Brodin

(Discipleship Journal Article)

"What do you think about the Virgin Mary?" Kathy, a nursing colleague, asked me as we sat down with our cups of coffee. "Excuse me!" I said, blinking in surprise. As she repeated her question, my mind raced. Did she want information about the Virgin Mary? Or did she want to spar with me, knowing I was a Protestant?

I didn't know her very well, but I had a hunch there was something else on her mind. "That is one of the most interesting questions anyone has asked me in a long time", I responded. "Why do you ask?"

She replied, "Well, I know that you're religious. I was wondering, well, we were wondering...." Now it was her turn to scramble a bit.

I drew her out by saying: "I find it fascinating that you think I'm religious. Tell me, what makes you say that?" Kathy explained that the other nurses discussed how much I knew about the Bible and said that religion was very real for me. She added that while she attended religious school growing up, she did not know much about the Bible.

I probed further. "I think you're telling me you want to know more about the Bible. Is that correct?" When Kathy nodded, I asked, "A lot of people think the Bible is irrelevant. May I ask why you'd like to know more about it?"

Kathy's eyes filled with tears. She told me her marriage was in trouble and that she was desperate for help. She had tried everything but religion. Now things were so bad she was seeking help from the Bible. I asked her what she thought it would offer to her. Kathy quietly said, "Hope."

When I asked her if she'd like to study the Bible together, she smiled and responded, "I was hoping you'd say that. I didn't know how to ask you, and, well, would you mind if my sister and my mom joined us? I've already told them about you."

Kathy's question about the Virgin Mary was the most religious question she could think to ask someone she considered religious. Her real need was for counsel and help. Had I responded with a theological treatise, I would have missed her heart by miles. Instead, I asked a few questions, I was learning the value of what I call the "question connection" - asking questions to create a conversation in which real issues can be discussed.

Even before Kathy and I talked, I had been learning about the power questions have to create conversations. A friend of mine is fond of repeating a statement she heard at a conference: "Behind every question is a statement, behind every statement is feeling."

She had experienced this truth years earlier when she had gingerly asked a trusted mentor, "How do you handle depression?" Her mentor quipped, "Oh, I just go out of one depression into the next." End of discussion. My friend longed to talk to her about how depressed and overwhelmed she felt. Behind her question was a statement: "I am depressed." Behind that statement lingered feelings of fear: She was afraid her depression would swallow her up, so she turned to a person she hoped would help her. Had this mentor responded with a few questions rather than a glib statement, the two of them could have connected about what was really going on.

GOING DEEPER

Real conversations take place when we get to the feelings behind statements. Asking questions is one way to do this. Questioning further uncovers the feelings behind the statements. When we can talk about how we truly feel, our lives change.

We miss out on real ministry when we fail to ask good questions. Take evangelism, for example. When most of us learn the nuts and bolts of sharing our faith, we learn to articulate information, to explain the key elements of the gospel. We may even learn to anticipate certain common objections and memorize verses to counter opposition. These are valuable skills to master. Yet we rarely spend much time learning how to create a conversation within which we can hear what the other person is thinking and feeling. What could happen if we would slow down the verbal exchange by asking good questions, listening intently to hear what the other person is thinking, and, in the spirit of conversation, to talk, truly talk, about the gospel?

When we are ready with answers before we know what the questions are, we miss opportunities to discern people's honest questions. Not too long ago, I was at a retreat with several nursing colleagues. After lunch one day, I went walking along the lakeshore with a coworker. Out of the total blue she asked, "Do you believe that only people who are 'born again' go to heaven?"

I was thrown off guard by her question. I sensed that there was a story behind it. Pushing back my finely honed evangelism skills, I instead replied, "What an interesting question. What's behind it?"

What tumbled out was a story of years of unrelenting criticism this nurse had received from a family member because she was not "born again." As I listened, I realized that a theological exegesis of several Bible passages about the conversion experience wouldn't have ministered to my friend at all. Instead I asked a series of questions that helped her explore feelings about the criticism that had been heaped on her over the years. In the safety of having been heard, this woman went on to ask me to explain what being born again really meant.

Creating conversations by asking good questions is a skill. Jesus was a Master at asking questions. When I read through the Gospel of Mark to track the way Jesus used questions, I found that throughout His ministry of teaching and healing, Jesus used questions to explain principles and to expose faulty thinking. He used questions to help people articulate what they wanted from Him. He answered questions with questions.

FOUR TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Four types of questions enhance our effectiveness in getting to the real issues people have: Probing questions, Personal questions, Process questions, and Provoking questions.

PROBING QUESTIONS

One type of question to master is a probing question. With probing questions we go after more information. Consider Jesus in Mark 3:1-6. He encountered a man with a withered hand, who was probably unable to work and provide for himself. Jesus, sensing the Pharisees were waiting for Him to break the Sabbath by healing the man, probed: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?" Jesus wanted to probe their hearts, to expose their stubbornness, and to appeal to a higher sense of mercy. By asking rather than accusing, His probing question exposed the hardness of their hearts.

Probing questions can be overused. Since probing questions go after information, the questioner needs to be careful not to seek more information than the person is willing to disclose. One way to soften a probing question is to state an observation first, then ask about the observation. When Kathy asked me about the Virgin Mary, a probing question such as, "Why are you asking that!" would have been abrupt. I softened the probe by acknowledging her curious nature when I said, "That is one of the most interesting questions anyone has asked me in a long time." Then I added, "Why do you ask?" By focusing on my observation, I didn't put her on the spot.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

Personal questions are a form of probing question. But more than drawing out additional information, personal questions help people reveal their inner feelings. When I said to Kathy, "A lot of people think the Bible is irrelevant. May I ask why you'd like to know more about it", I asked her a very, personal question. Going beyond her interest or knowledge of religious topics, I asked her why she wanted to know more about the Bible. It was no surprise that Kathy teared up. Her desire to know more about the Bible was linked to the distress she felt in her marriage. My question revealed very personal facts. Because of the potential for personal questions to expose people, it's a good idea to word personal questions in a way that asks permission.

In Mark 8:27-33, Jesus was talking with His disciples as they walked between villages. Jesus asked, "Who do people say I am!" He probed for information and they replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

Then Jesus took the level of questioning deeper when He asked, "But what about you? ... Who do you say that I am?" Jesus wanted them to disclose what they personally thought. He was asking them to declare themselves.

Later, when Jesus was entering Jericho, a blind man named Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus. The crowd tried to shush him, but Jesus stopped to interact with him. He threw his cloak aside, jumped to his feet, and came to Jesus (Mark 10:46-52).

"What do you want me to do for you!" Jesus asked him.

The blind man replied, "Rabbi, I want to see."

Jesus met Bartimaeus right where he was and asked him a very personal question: What did he want? I can almost see the crowd around them, shoving and pushing to get a closer look at what was going on. But in the middle of the commotion, Jesus had a private exchange with a man who responded to a very personal question by asking for the most important thing he could imagine—sight.

PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process questions guide what's going on during a conversation. When I was talking to my nursing colleague by the lake, I sensed that she was divulging more than she had wanted to say. I backed up the conversation and said, "I sense this is difficult for you to talk about. Is this something you want me to know about? I'm glad to listen. " That gave my colleague permission to stop the conversation or choose to continue. She told me, "I'm glad I can talk to someone about this. I never have before today. I didn't know how hurtful this family member's criticism has been to me until now. So I've never wanted to talk about religion."

Process questions can also provide insight into how another person is handling a situation. Recently, an 85-year old woman was informed that her kidneys were shutting down and that she needed to begin dialysis to stay alive. Her decision was literally a life-and-death decision. This woman asked her daughter what to do. The daughter gently responded, "Mom, I can't tell you what to do. The decision needs to be yours." The mother decided not to go on dialysis, but to let nature take its course.

When the daughter described this exchange to my friend, she helped her process the events by asking, "What is it like for you to know your mother is choosing to die?" Questions like these helped that daughter process her feelings, to tell someone about the weight she was carrying.

PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS

Provocative questions generate thoughtful conversations. They get to the heart of the matter. One time I said to a group of nurses who were waiting for a patient to arrive, "You all mention the name of Jesus freely. Tell me, what do you really think about Him?" After the snickers died down, my question provoked a lively conversation. Each of them had plenty to say. No one had ever asked them before. Over the next several days, conversations about the Lord grew out of this discussion.

Jesus excelled at provocative questions. He sparred with those who tested Him, with those who refused to believe. When the teachers of the law and the elders approached Him and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things?" Jesus answered them a provocative question: "I will ask you one question. Answer me and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

John's baptism - was it from heaven, or from men" (Mark 11:27-33). Though they had tried to trap him, Jesus' provocative question put them on the defensive.

Provocative questions create conversation and discussion. Behind opinions reside statements. And behind statements reside feelings---even in a lively exchange. Sometimes an energized discussion will allow feelings and opinions to emerge that otherwise would stay hidden.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Questions open doors into another person's life. Good questions aren't easy to formulate or use. It's simpler to make statements and express opinions than to ask questions. Asking questions requires us to focus on the other person. It also implies that we need to listen to and value what the other person has to say.

Learning to ask questions that create conversations is a skill any of us can master. Asking questions demonstrates that we care. As people feel heard and valued, they will tell us more in response to good questions.

Questions to help someone think more deeply about a Bible verse

(i.e. Discussing the Gospel or the Lord Jesus or faith with another person,
or leading a Bible Study discussion)

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Rule of thumb...

60% asking questions and listening

30% using third party stories or questions that build intrigue

10% sharing truth or my experience woven into the discussion

1. *Synonyms*: "What are some words or phrases that mean the same thing as _____?"
2. *Definitions*: "How would you define _____?"
3. *Differences*: "What do you think is the difference between _____ and _____?"
4. *Similarities*: "In what ways would you say that _____ and _____ are alike?"
5. *Opposites*: "What do you think is the opposite of _____?"
6. *Relationships*: "What do you think is the relationship between _____ and _____?"
7. *Examples*: "What are some examples of _____?"
8. *Why*: "Why does this verse say _____ when several other passages emphasize _____?"
9. *Explain*: "How would you explain verse _____?"
" How would you explain _____'s change of attitude?"
10. *Extremes*: "Which one of these do you feel is the most (or the least) _____?"
11. *Quantity/Quality*: "How significant do you think _____ really is?"
12. *How*: "How is _____ of any value today?"