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OUT SHARING
THEIR

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SPECIAL
SECTION




I WAS HOME ALONE in front of the TV, totally immersed in the last two minutes of a critical football game, when the doorbell rang. Reluctant to give up my Sunday football fix, I prepared myself to “stiff arm” (in Christian love, of course) whoever was at the door. But when I opened the door, two Mormons greeted me.

As I listened to their awkward attempts at spiritual conversation, pictures flashed through my mind of some of my own experiences in talking about my beliefs. Those memories made me feel sorry both for my uninvited guests and for myself!

Can you identify? Have your attempts to engage with others about your beliefs ended in a series of fumbles? I’ve talked about evangelism around the world, and it may hearten you to know that wherever I go, Christians ask the same questions about how to move beyond clumsy monologues into more assured and winsome dialogues. This is particularly difficult when we’re answering tough questions nonChristians ask about our Christian faith.

Perhaps you’ll hear yourself in some of the questions that follow, and perhaps you will find in the answers the encouragement to continue talking with the people around you about God’s good news.

BY DOUG POLLOCK



“HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO PULL OFF THESE CONVERSATIONS WHEN I CAN’T THINK WELL ON MY FEET (AND I’M CERTAINLY NOT INTELLECTUAL)?”

Let’s admit the obvious: The people who write about how to answer difficult questions from nonChristians are almost always naturally gifted at such conversations. You may never sound like they do—and you don’t have to—but that doesn’t mean you can’t take some baby steps toward sharing your faith more comfortably and competently.

First, I encourage you to become a connoisseur of good questions. Great questions stimulate great conversations. So when you come across a good question, write it down and refer to it from time to time. You’ll eventually find yourself interjecting these questions into your conversations at appropriate times.

For example, when someone shares a belief that leaves you scratching your head, you could reply, “That’s interesting. I’m wondering, how did you come to those conclusions?” Many times, when the other person articulates his belief systems, he becomes uncomfortable with them even as he

expresses them. That’s the power of a simple question!

Garry Poole’s *The Complete Book of Questions* gives 1,001 questions to prime your mental pump. But remember, the best questions flow from authentic dialogue and demonstrate that you’ve been listening. You’ll know you are on the right track when the other person says, “Wow, that’s a great question, I’ve never thought about that before.”

Also, I find it helpful to remind myself that God loves me for who I am and what I can *already* bring to a conversation, however imperfect or unpolished. And He also loves to stretch me and prepare me for future opportunities. If you are faithful today with the little you think you have to offer in conversation, I believe you’ll grow more confident and competent in future conversations. God promises in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 that we will be given more when we are faithful with what we have (v. 23).



“WHAT DO I DO WHEN NONCHRISTIANS ASK ME QUESTIONS I CAN’T ANSWER?”

This is a great situation to be in because most people are suspicious of someone who thinks he has all the answers.

If the answer to your friend’s question can be found through research, ask if he would be willing to meet with you in a week. Then do your homework. AllAboutGod.com is a good resource; so is your local Christian bookstore. You could also ask your pastor or someone else in Christian ministry to help you work through the tough question.

Sometimes, however, we don’t have an answer to a difficult question because there *isn’t* an answer. For example, if someone were to ask me why God didn’t thwart the plans of the 9/11 terrorists, I could go on and on about God’s sovereignty and man’s free will, but the words would likely sound hollow after a while. If we could easily explain such questions with our finite minds, God would not be God. So sometimes “I don’t know” is not a cop-out, but a humble acknowledgement that God doesn’t come to us for advice and that He can’t always be explained. Being honest about our struggles with the mysteries of life can build bridges of credibility with our questioners.

“WHAT DO I DO WHEN NOTHING I SAY SEEMS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THE OTHER PERSON?”

In many instances, people resist the truth of the gospel because they view God or God’s people as a source of personal pain. Your attempts to enter into a spiritual conversation may have triggered those emotions from the past and caused fresh irritation. If that’s the case, your best recourse may be to pray and to serve your way into this person’s heart through acts of kindness.

Sometimes you can probe, patiently and gently, for the source of resistance and frustration. You might say, “Our conversations seem to become very awkward when we talk about spiritual matters. I’ve been wondering if you’ve had some negative encounters with God or with Christians.” Another approach is to say, “I sense that I might have said something in our last conversation that caused you to close down. If so, could you help me understand what I said or how I came across? I value our friendship and enjoy our conversations, and if I’ve offended you I’d like to make things right.”



“NONE OF MY NOT-YET-CHRISTIAN FRIENDS ARE ASKING ME SPIRITUAL QUESTIONS. SHOULD I JUST LEAVE IT ALONE?”

First, I’d ask myself why this is so. Am I not safe enough for such matters to be discussed? Maybe my friends fear they are going to get a lecture with chapter and verse included, and they don’t want to go there. Or they might not be asking questions about faith because they don’t want to expose their ignorance. We forget that not-yet-Christians can be just as intimidated by us as we are by them.

“Leaving it alone,” though, is probably a poor option unless our friends have specifically declared spiritual conversations off limits. More likely, we need to look for ways to connect spiritual conversations to everyday events. For example, last fall a timely question would have been, “Hey, what do you think

about the Christians who are declaring that God allowed New Orleans to flood because of its moral decadence?”

After raising the issue in this way, watch and listen to the responses. A gospel conversation without listening is like driving a car blindfolded. Body language and tone of voice clue us in on whether to keep going, slow down, or stop. The Apostle Paul reminds us to “be wise in the way you act toward outsiders” (Col. 4:5). Many times we miss the hints “outsiders” are giving us because our focus is more on what we are saying than on how they are responding. As we listen with both our eyes and ears, we will learn to dialogue based on where people are, not where we would like them to be.

“THE STUFF PEOPLE SAY ABOUT MY FAITH MAKES ME ANGRY. I GO INTO DEBATE MODE, AND ALL I CARE ABOUT IS WINNING. HOW CAN I LEARN TO BACK OFF?”

You might begin by reminding yourself that winning in a conversation may shut down future opportunities to talk with that person. After all, the cost of your “win” is that the other person feels like a loser.

It’s also helpful, I find, to determine what triggers your anger. When you understand why you get so worked up, you have a better chance of avoiding this reaction. Review your past conversations and look for patterns—what topics, questions, or reactions fire you up? After you identify these, ask the Lord to help you sort out what’s going on inside of you. We need this kind of self-understanding if we are to live the truth of 2 Tim. 2:23-25:

Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.

Above all, it helps to remember that the person I’m talking with is created in God’s image and loved by Him.

“WHAT IF MY FRIEND’S OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY ARE SO CREDIBLE THAT I START TO DOUBT MY OWN FAITH?”

Just because you acknowledge that someone has made a good point doesn't mean you are denying Christ. There will always be questions about your faith that you've never considered. When your friend presents a particularly strong argument against your beliefs, thank him for challenging you to dig deeper.

Don't forget, Thomas had doubts even after being in Christ's presence for three years. It seems reasonable that you and I might have a few doubts along the way as well. Let your doubts drive you to seek more of God. As you receive more insight into His character and His ways, you'll be able to go further and deeper in your spiritual conversations.

“IS IT EVER OK TO SAY, ‘I’M NOT THE PERSON WHO CAN TALK TO YOU ABOUT THIS’ OR ‘HAVING THIS CONVERSATION AGAIN IS POINTLESS; LET’S JUST DROP IT?’”

This is always an option, and it's an honest one. If you find yourself at an “I'm right/you're wrong” impasse, it's probably time to drop the subject.

Sometimes, however, I want to duck out of conversations just because I'm impatient with the other person's inability to grasp the obvious. But I've learned that, if the other person is willing to keep the conversation going, Christ is faithful to give me what I lack (patience) so I can hang in there for His sake.

So honestly assess why you want to end the conversation. Even if you conclude that you're the wrong person to continue this dialogue, try to remain in the relationship. You can also ask God to send someone else into your friend's life who might be better equipped to pick up the conversation and run with it. Or find a book about your topic, and use it as a kind of “third party” to keep the conversation going.

“EVENTUALLY, DOESN'T IT ALL COME DOWN TO ‘YOU JUST HAVE TO BELIEVE?’”

Yes, at some point a person has to cross over from unbelief to belief, but as Josh McDowell has said, “The heart cannot embrace what the mind rejects as false.”

For many who've heard the gospel but cannot embrace its message, the missing link is a loving, Spirit-filled Christian community. Sometimes seeing the body of Christ in action helps a non-Christian *feel* the truth they have been resisting. Look for opportunities to bring your friend into your community of believers.

John 1:12-13 reminds us of another element in the journey from unbelief to belief: Children of God are born from above, not by human decision. The Holy Spirit is the source for true conversion.

Knowing that, we need to look for signs of His work. I've identified a number of tip-offs that a spiritual birth is on the way. When people initiate spiritual conversations, God is at work. When the frequency and depth of their questions increases, God is at work. When they express sorrow, or dissatisfaction their lives, God is at work. When they begin to read the Bible on their own, God is at work.

I compare what is happening at this stage to listening to the two speakers of a stereo. One ear needs to be turned toward heaven, the other turned toward the “almost” Christian. With the Spirit's help, I start to discern and interpret what God is doing in the person's life. Also with His help I often get to guide my friend toward the

next step. Sometimes that involves sharing my personal testimony. At other times, I'm able to show how specific scriptures apply to something my friend is wrestling with. And through it all, I pray that my friend will embrace what God is doing in his life.

I hope I've addressed a few of your questions. But what you really need, more than more talk from me, is to take your own leap—not from unbelief to belief, but from avoidance to engagement. Jump into those conversations going on around you; I assure you, Jesus' words to His disciples hold true for you as well:

Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. —Mt. 10:19-20

God's presence is what makes gospel conversations so exciting, if not intoxicating. He is “making his appeal through us” (2 Cor. 5:20). Think about that! Now, are you ready for a good conversation? ☺

about the author

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