

Ask Before You Answer!

1 Peter 3:15 [NIV] *“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,”*

We are told that we must be so well versed with the basis of our beliefs that we can answer effectively anyone who asks why we have the hope that we do.

We should respond with gentleness and respect.

I would like to add another attitude to our approach to making our answer, so that we follow the example given by Jesus Christ.

Mark 10:17-18 [New King James] *“Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?’ So Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God.’”*

Why did Jesus Christ answer the urgent request in this way?

Jesus Christ knew that this young man was not going to like the answer to his question, so Jesus made sure that he knew exactly to Whom he was addressing the question.

Matthew 22:17-20 [New King James] *“‘Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’ But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, ‘Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.’ So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, ‘Whose image and inscription is this?’”*

Jesus Christ knew this was not a genuine desire to know their relationship with God, it was a trick question to try and discredit Jesus in the sight of the people who were listening to this conversation.

So Jesus Christ answered their question with a question so they had to answer their own question, but not in a way they wanted to.

Matthew 12:9-12 [New King James] *“Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’ that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, ‘What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.’”*

Again Jesus Christ’s response was to ask those who were questioning Him a question.

Matthew 21:23-27 [New King James] *“Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?’ But Jesus answered and said to them, ‘I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?’ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” He will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” But if we say, “From men,” we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.’ So they answered Jesus and said, ‘We do not know.’ And He said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.’”*

Isn’t it uncanny how often our Lord Jesus Christ answered a question with a question?

After many years of answering questions that non-believers posed to me as a minister of Jesus Christ, I am tired of seeing that an answer is not really what they want.

There have been far too many times, when I have answered a question with what I knew was a Biblically accurate, logically sound answer, only to see the questioner shrug their shoulders and turn away.

It was as if they now had more confirmation that Christian beliefs really are only for simpletons.

Instead of my answer moving that person closer to their salvation, it had pushed them further away.

Instead of my answer engaging their mind or urging them to consider an alternative perspective in life, my answer gave them ammunition for future attacks against the gospel message.

So, I've now started to answer questions with questions and find the results are far better.

Role reversal

When asked, *“do you think that people who do not accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour, like all those sincere and dedicated followers of non-Christian religions will go to hell?”*

My response was, “do you believe in hell?”

My antagonist had probably never seriously considered the possibility of hell!

They looked puzzled. perhaps because they were being challenged when they thought they were the one doing the challenging.

Finally, after a long silence, they replied, *“no, I don't believe in hell. I think it's ridiculous.”*

I chose to echo their words, “then why are you asking me such a ridiculous question?”

I was not trying to be a *“wise guy,”* I simply wanted that person to face up to the assumptions behind their own question. Their response seemed to indicate that I had a good point.

Another person who had heard about this question and answer responded by saying, *“well, I do believe in hell. Do you think then that anyone who disagrees with your Christian beliefs are going to hell?”*

Again I questioned, *“do you think anyone goes there? Is Hitler in hell?”*

[Hitler has turned out to be quite a helpful, even if unlikely, ally in these kind of questions.]

Back came the reply, *“of course Hitler's in hell.”*

My response was another question: *“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 Christ's anointing work ensued.

One atheist confronted me by saying, “I feel Christians fail to present a decent answer for all the evil in the world.”

My response was, “so what is your explanation?”

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

I asked them if there was an atheistic way to make sense of such things as the Nazi’s slaughter of 6 million innocent Jews.

Again, their answer was a non-answer.

I told this atheist that the Christian answer to the problem of evil may have its shortcomings in human thought, but my incomplete answer was better than no answer at all.

Good questions

Answering a question with a question has some significant advantages over the use of direct answers.

It brings to the surface the questioner’s assumptions.

It also takes the pressure off the one being questioned, and transfers the pressure onto the one asking the question.

This is important because as long as we are on the defensive, the questioners are not really wrestling with the issues involved.

They are just watching us squirm.

The example of **Matthew 21:23-27** was simply an attack of Jesus Christ’s authority that was posing as a question.

Answering such attacks with questions not only takes the heat off us and deflects it to the other person, it also tones down any hostility.

Answering a question with a question also paves the way for an answer that may not otherwise be received.

Jesus Christ’s conversation with the woman at the well fits this pattern, [**John 4:1-26**].

The woman’s notions of righteousness, sin and worship needed to be challenged before she would accept Jesus’ way of seeing these topics.

Without Jesus Christ’s questions, it is doubtful if she ever would have got 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, concise statement of what God’s Word, the Christian Bible, tells us.

There were times when Jesus Christ gave a direct answer.

Mark 12:28-34 [New King James] *“Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, ‘Which is the first commandment of all?’ Jesus answered him, ‘The first of all the commandments is: “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ So the scribe said to Him, ‘Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself, is more than all the*

whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.’ Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ But after that no one dared question Him.”

To this question Jesus Christ gave a direct answer most likely because He perceived that the question was genuine, as the man’s response showed.

Yet often we need to hold back our answer and initiate genuine dialogue with the questioner.

When your neighbour asks you why you think Jesus Christ was anything more than a good teacher, ask them why they think He was a good teacher.

Have they read a lot of Jesus Christ’s teachings?

What would they say was the main message that Jesus Christ brought?

When a person asks why we still believe in a loving God when there are so many people dying of AIDS and in local wars worldwide, ask them how they explain such horrible tragedies.

The Christian message to this world is too important for it to continue to fall upon deaf ears.

Our answers really are what people need to hear if we could just get them to really listen.

We are told we must be ready to give answers, but we must follow Jesus Christ’s method of doing so by answering a question with a question.

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