

Questions *Christians* Ask

By Doug Pollock

Several years ago, I found myself at home alone on a Sunday afternoon totally immersed in the last two minutes of a pro football game that would decide which team would make the playoff's. I was annoyingly distracted from the gridiron drama by the sound of my doorbell. Somebody outside my house was obviously not in touch with what was going on inside my house. I prepared myself to quickly "stiff arm" (in Christian love of course) whoever was at the door so I could get back to my "Sunday football fix". Unfortunately when I opened the door, two Mormons stood ready to greet me. They wanted to engage me in spiritual conversation. I found myself suspended in kind of a spiritual time warp as they fumbled the ball early and often in their struggle to start up a conversation with me. As I listened to their awkward attempts to get a conversation started, pictures of bygone days began to flash through my mind of the times when I was the one attempting to start spiritual conversations. It was surreal! I felt sorry for them and for myself at the same time. Unbeknownst to Elder Bob and Elder Jim, they were being used by God in ways I'm sure they never intended in that moment. They helped me begin to turn the corner on how I started spiritual conversations with others.

If you have just finished reading Tim and Randy's articles, maybe you are having a similar "aha" moment like I did on my front door step that day. It's hard not to compare our attempts at spiritual conversation in the past to the sagely wisdom offered to us by these two veterans of gospel conversation. Like the Mormons in my story, maybe your attempts to start spiritual conversations end up "weirding" others out. As I travel around the world to help people in churches and Para-church ministries grow in their confidence and competence in these areas, Christians often ask the following kinds of questions as they journey out from the land of gospel monologues into the exciting land of gospel dialogues.

1. "I can't think on my feet very well, and I'm certainly not an intellectual. How am I supposed to pull off these kinds of conversations?"

Let's state the obvious: the people who write articles about "how to answer tough questions" are the best that Christianity has to offer at these kinds of conversations. That's why they were

selected to write the articles. You may never pull off a conversation the way they do—and you don't have to—but that doesn't mean you can't start by taking some "baby" steps to become more competent in this area.

The first step I'd like to encourage you to take is to become a connoisseur of good questions. It's been said that great questions spur great thoughts and stimulate great conversations. So, when you come across one, write it down and tuck away for another day. You'll eventually find yourself interjecting these questions into your conversations at the appropriate times. For instance when someone shares a belief that leaves you scratching your head for a response, maybe you could reply this way. "That's an interesting belief, I'm wondering how you came to those conclusions?" Really good questions lead to self-discovery and many times prompt the other person to articulate belief systems that they become uncomfortable with even as they are expressing them. Gary Poole's book entitled "The Complete Book of Questions" will give you 1001 questions to prime your mental pump. Just keep this big idea in mind: the best questions flow from an authentic dialogue and demonstrate that you have been listening. You'll know you are on the right track when you hear comments like; "Wow, that's a great question, I've never thought about that before."

Secondly, Proverbs 17:28 says that "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent and discerning if he holds his tongue." (NIV) When you are struggling for words, this passage suggests it's best to remain silent. You might say something like "I'm not really prepared to say anything about that right now, but after I mull it over I might like to talk more about it; would that be OK?" Or maybe you know the question is way over your head, so with authenticity acknowledge that fact. You might ask the person you are in conversation with if you could invite one of your more "cerebrally gifted" friends to join you sometime in the near future. This will help take the pressure off of you and provide the space you need to re-engage in the conversation at your own comfort level.

Finally, I have found it helpful to remind myself that God loves me for who I am and what I bring to a conversation today. He also loves me too much to leave me the way I am. So, He puts me into conversations that stretch and prepare me for the future. If you are faithful with the little you think you have to offer in conversation today, I think you will find yourself growing more and more confident and competent to handle more difficult conversations in the future. God does

promise us in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 that we will be given more when we are faithful with what we have.

2. I'm afraid they will ask me questions I won't be able to answer, how do I handle this when it happens?

This is actually a great situation to be in because most people are fairly suspicious of someone who thinks they have all the answers. So with humility affirm them for asking such a great question. Then thank them for giving you an opportunity to grow.

Sometimes we don't have an answer simply because we haven't learned enough about the question at hand. If this is the case, ask them if they would be willing to get back together again in a week. This will give you a chance to do your homework. If you are looking for resources check out AllAboutGod.com for starters or head to a good Christian bookstore. You might also want to seek out a full-time Christian worker to help you work your way through the tough question.

At other times we don't have an answer because there *isn't* an answer. If someone asks me why God did not thwart the plans of the terrorists on 9/11, I could choose to go into a lengthy discourse on God's sovereignty and man's free will but at some point the words will begin to sound empty and hollow. If you and I could easily explain questions like this with our finite minds God would not be God. When you authentically validate your own struggle with the mysteries of life, you build bridges of credibility. Sometimes "I don't know" is not a cop out, but a humble acknowledgement that God doesn't come to you for advice.

3. "What do I do when the person I'm talking to is so resistant/hurt/turned off that nothing I say seems to make a difference. What do I do then?"

I don't know many people who hear truth very clearly when they perceive that the source of their pain stems from God and/or His people. Even if the frustration or anger you encounter started long before you knew the person, your attempts at spiritual conversation trigger all those emotions from the past. If they are extremely resistant, more words just serve to bring more irritation and probably won't make a difference. Your only recourse at this point may very well be to pray and serve your way into their heart through acts of kindness.

On the other hand, it's possible that if you patiently and sensitively probe to discover the source of pain and frustration and respond with empathy, the potential for conversation becomes viable. For instance, a question like this might get the conversation going. "It seems like our conversation becomes very awkward when spiritual matters are discussed. I've been wondering if you had some negative encounters with God and his people."

If I sense that I may be the source of the resistance but I'm not sure I might say something like this: "I sense that I might have said something in our last conversation that has caused you to close down. If so, could you help me understand what I said or how I come across? I value our friendship and enjoy our conversations and if I have offended you I'd like to make things right."

4. "None of my not-yet Christian friends seem to be asking these kinds of questions. Does that mean I should I just leave it alone?"

It's hard to say because there could be a variety of reasons for this. Maybe you are not safe enough for such matters to be discussed. If your friends feel like they are going to get a moral lecture with chapter and verse included they might not want to go there. I think we have to realize that not-yet Christians can be just as intimidated by us as we are of them. They might not be asking us their questions because they do not want to expose their ignorance on the topic.

"Leaving it alone," though, has never seemed like an option that we should settle for unless they have told us that spiritual conversation is off limits. If a "spiritual stop sign" has not been posted, we need to respectfully stir the waters by making it easier for conversation to flow out of the happenings of every day life. The world around us gives us many natural opportunities to do just that. For example, when I was writing this article the following question would certainly have been relevant; "Hey, what do you think about the Christians who are declaring that God allowed the floods to wipe out the moral decadence in New Orleans?"

After stirring the waters, I watch and listen carefully for the responses that I get. A gospel conversation without listening is like driving a car blindfolded. Body language and tone of voice many times serve to clue us in on whether to keep going, slow down, or just plain stop. The apostle Paul reminds us to "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders . . . Colossians 4:5 (NIV) 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 to what we are saying. As we learn to listen with

our eyes and see with our ears, we will wisely begin to start where they are, not where we would like them to be in our conversations.

5. "Frankly, the stuff people say about my faith gets me pretty worked up. When I get in that mode, I want to win. How can I learn to back off?"

What do you really get with a win? Someone else created in the image of God who is left feeling like a loser. So you need to remind yourself that winning in a conversation may lead to losing opportunities for future interaction with that person.

I think it's helpful to assess the trigger points that put you in this kind of a mode. When you better understand why you get so worked up, you have a better chance of avoiding this kind of an outcome. I'd like to encourage you to go back through your past conversations and look for patterns, topics, or hot buttons that tend to fire you up. When you identify these, come before the Lord in prayer and ask Him to help you sort out what's going on inside you. This is essential if we are going to live out the truth found in II Timothy 2:23-25, which says "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 . . .(NIV)

6. "I listen to my not-yet Christian friend's objection to Christianity and think, *He's making a really good point; I've never considered that.* Not only can't I give him an answer, I start to doubt my own faith."

I think we can acknowledge that someone has made a good point without feeling like we have denied Christ. Truth is supposed to surface under the scrutiny of cross-examination. It's OK to acknowledge to yourself and to your friend that there are questions about your faith that you've never considered and thank him or her for challenging you to dig deeper.

After all, if Thomas had his doubts after being in Christ's presence for three years, it seems more than reasonable that you and I might have a few along the way as well. Many times God uses our doubts as a catalyst to seek Him. As we receive more insight, our capacity to go further and deeper into conversation is expanded.

7. "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 a very honest one at that. Conversations move towards being pointless when they end up gridlocked in an “I’m right/you’re wrong” line drawn in the conversational sand. If you find yourself at this point, it’s probably time to drop the topic.

Sometimes, however, I want to duck out of conversations due to my lack of patience with the person’s seeming inability to grasp the obvious. Rather than “lose my life to find it” by hanging in there during a tough conversation, I find it easier to opt for comfort rather than the cross. I’ve learned that if the other person is willing, Christ is able to give us what we lack (patience in my example) to engage in conversation for His sake, not ours.

What I’m advocating for is an honest assessment of what’s really driving us to the point of ending a conversation. Even when we come to this conclusion for good reasons, we can still be helpful in other ways. Maybe you know someone else who might be better equipped to pick up the conversation and run with it. Just because you drop the conversation, doesn’t mean you have to drop meeting the needs of your friend. Another possibility is to find a book that zeroes in on your topic of conversation, and use it as the fuel to keep the conversation going.

8. "Eventually, doesn't it all come down to, you just have to believe"?"

Yes, at some point in the process of coming to God, a person does have to cross over from unbelief to belief, but that doesn’t mean we should encourage blind leaps into the dark. Josh McDowell used to say, "The heart cannot embrace what the mind rejects as false".

If there is a cerebral impasse that makes the 18-inch journey from the head to the heart difficult, we must respectfully and sensitively come alongside someone with the apologetic needed to make belief more plausible.

For many, the missing ingredient at this point is a loving, spirit filled Christian community. This will help them to *feel* the truth, which makes the 18-inch journey a whole lot easier. God often uses our built-in need to belong to make the journey towards believing more tangible.

Having said all that, John 1:12,13 reminds us that true children of God are born from above not by human decision alone. At some point our conversations need to move from the horizontal plane to the vertical, as the Holy Spirit is the source for true conversion.

We need to look for signs of His work in our conversations. The following serve as tip off's to me that another spiritual birth is coming soon and it's time for me to take on the role of a "spiritual midwife". When they start initiating spiritual conversation and the frequency and depth of their questions increases, God is at work. When they express sorrow, dissatisfaction, or fears about their life direction and begin to read the bible on their own, God is at work. My role as a "spiritual midwife" is to help interpret what God is doing in them and to guide them on to take the next step. Words of testimony, specific scriptures, prayer, etc. can be used mightily of God during this birthing process. As I listen in "stereo", one ear towards heaven and one ear on the "soon to become a Christian", I find the Holy Spirit fulfills His role as the helper quite nicely.

So, now you're ready to go for it! Tim and Randy have given you the tools and the perspectives needed, and hopefully I have answered a few of your questions. It's time, so to speak, to jump into those conversations going on around you and God's net will appear. Jesus gave his disciples this principle in Matthew 10:19-20 when he said . . . "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." It's the "witness" of God that makes gospel conversations so exciting, if not intoxicating. When we talk to God about men, before we talk to men about God, we can be faith confident that God will manifest Himself in our conversations to make His appeal through us (II Corinthians 5:20). What do you think? Let's grab a cup of coffee and talk about it some time. I'm always up for a good conversation.

Doug Pollock is the evangelism director for Athletes in Action (the athletic ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ). His evangelistic endeavors have taken him to 36 countries worldwide and throughout most of the U.S. He is the co-author of Irresistible Evangelism (Group). He can be reached at 937-289-1127/soldout1@aol.com to schedule the six hour "Irresistible Evangelism" workshop he teaches all over the world.