Article: **DQ001**

THE POWER OF QUESTIONS

This article first appeared in the Effective Evangelism column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 27, number 2 (2004). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: http://www.equip.org

Many Christians assume they should answer anyone who asks about their hope (1 Pet. 3:15) with a statement, such as a fact or an argument. Answering with a question, however, is also a powerful tool that can be employed successfully with a little practice. Both Jesus and Paul regularly used questions in evangelism, apologetics, and teaching.[1]

The writer of Proverbs 18:17 also highlighted the value of asking questions: "The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him" (NIV). Why are questions so powerful? Because questions demand answers, stimulate thinking, give us valuable information, provoke people to open up, and help people convince themselves.[2]

The greatest practical value of using questions is that the questioner does not have to possess all the answers. A Christian can engage in a discussion without knowing everything about an issue since he or she is not telling but is asking. For those who are not comfortable with their level of knowledge on a subject or who feel they are not skilled at making arguments, questioning becomes an excellent tool that makes the difference between actively engaging the culture or sitting on the sidelines.

An Example from Jesus. Matthew provides us with an example of a statement-and-question format that Jesus used many times (see Matt. 6:25–34). Here He is teaching His followers not to worry. He first states the principle, then asks a series of questions, then finishes with a summary of the concept. What purpose do the questions serve? They stimulate the listeners' thinking while provoking the listeners to persuade themselves. I imagine that Jesus' followers could have easily dismissed His exhortations not to worry with internal dialogue about their problems, the stresses and strains of life, and the risks they faced each day. The poignant questions Jesus offered, however, demolished these arguments by directing their attention to two thought-provoking questions: (1) What does worry do for you? and (2) Is God faithful? At the same time, they also stimulated His listeners to think through the issues, thereby persuading themselves to reach Jesus' intended conclusion.

The answer to the first question appears to be obvious — worry does nothing for you. The second requires the hearers to do some self-evaluation about whether they really trust God. If the answer is *yes*, then the conclusion follows logically: worry makes no sense. In the event the hearer still has not grasped the concept, Jesus wrapped up the teaching by repeating the concept: "Do not worry."

Jesus' use of questions is powerful and persuasive. He cut through rationalizations by asking the right questions, and these questions became the catalyst on an almost inexorable logical path to the conclusion. Phillip Johnson points out, "If I start with the right beginning question and let the answer to that first question suggest the next question and so on through each succeeding step, then the irresistible power of logic will eventually take me to the correct conclusion, even if at first that conclusion seems to be a very long way off.[3]

What Is a Good Question? A good question has three important characteristics. First, the question must be simple and confined to one topic. Avoid questions that require lengthy set-ups or multiple answers or that contain excessive verbiage.

Second, the question must be clear and easy to understand. Use vocabulary with which the respondent is familiar. Avoid using ambiguous or vague terms and "Christian" jargon. The Christian apologist should

be aware of Christian terms and concepts that are often points of debate among Christians or between Christians and cultists, as well as those terms and concepts that are not well known outside Christian circles. Asking someone if he or she believes Jesus was the *propitiation* for his or her sins, for example, would probably not be effective since few people have ever heard of the word *propitiation* outside Christian circles. A practical strategy is to avoid these terms altogether and to represent the concepts by using different words.

Determining the right words to use largely depends on the context of the situation you are in, and, most importantly, the respondent's background, level of knowledge, and communication style. Using a specialized vocabulary would be more appropriate in an advanced level comparative religions class than in a discussion with the man or woman on the street. How do you know the respondent's background and level of knowledge? You ask questions! The responses to a few questions in these areas will allow you to adjust your approach to fit the person and the situation.

Third, the question should not contain frightening or emotionally charged words. Emotionally charged words evoke a visceral reaction and not a considered response. They, consequently, are usually inappropriate for purposes of quality dialogue. The word *sin*, for instance, is extremely emotionally charged. In my encounters with non-Christians, I have received some interesting reactions to this word. The reactions said something about their view of the word, but they did not necessarily tell me about their view of the concept underlying the word, since a person's understanding of a word may have little to do with the word's actual definition. In order to discharge the word *sin* of emotions, it can be first described as "missing the mark" or "being imperfect" (then subsequently developed to "breaking God's law" or something similar, which more fully communicates the biblical understanding of sin).

When I suggest describing a term or concept differently, I do not mean that we should change the definition. The Christian apologist must be careful and accurate. By using accurate, alternate descriptions, however, Christian concepts will be understood, and one can receive informative answers without the reactionary overlays.

Questions to Avoid. Should you avoid some types of questions? Yes. The leading question should generally be avoided. Leading questions are those that suggest or infer the correct answer. The power of suggestion can easily sway people. You may receive an accommodating answer, therefore, rather than accurate information and important details. Leading questions commonly begin with phrases such as "Don't you think…?" "Shouldn't you…?" or "Would you agree…?" These questions obviously are suggesting a specific answer. That being said, there *is* an appropriate time for the leading question, such as when all is said and done, yet the person needs a little pull to make a decision or come to the final conclusion.

How to Question. The questioning process is quite simple, but failure to observe the following steps will lead to misunderstandings and ineffective communication. They will reduce the impact of your questions.

First, *ask the question*. If the question is developed according to the guidelines above, it should produce a reasonable response. If not, the question may need to be rephrased.

Second, *receive the answer*. To receive the answer fully one must actively listen to the response. Active listening involves focusing attention to what the respondent is saying, avoiding interruption, and absorbing all the nonverbal visual and audio messages being expressed by the respondent. A person's "body language" and tone of voice can be as important as what he or she says. The time during which you receive the answer is not the time for developing additional questions or evaluating the response. For a complex or lengthy response, you may find it helpful to confirm your understanding of the response by restating it or "reading it back" to them ("In other words, are you saying…?").

Finally, after one has received the answer, only then should one *evaluate the response*. The response should be evaluated for its logical soundness and factual accuracy, its assumptions, and its consistency with known information or previous responses.

Whether the sequence of questions should be from general to specific or from specific to general depends on the topic being discussed. In either case, however, the point is to use information obtained from a question to formulate the next logical question and to move step by step to the final destination, be that an understanding, a conclusion, or a decision.

Open-ended questions are those that allow the respondents to give an unstructured response, thereby eliciting information that is important to them. These are questions that ask for description or explanation. "How" and "why" are often used here. The answer to an open-ended question will reveal information about the respondent's assumptions, prejudices, values, and beliefs, all of which are important to a discussion and to formulating subsequent questions. Closed-ended questions, on the other hand, require a certain, sometimes predetermined answer and should be used when the desire is to have the respondent give particular information. Multiple choice, yes/no, and true/false questions are closed-ended questions. Who? What? When? and Where? are also closed-ended questions that are useful.

"Why?" is a particularly effective question because it brings out reasoning, assumptions, and knowledge, thus helping to uncover a person's worldview. It must be asked sincerely, however, with gentleness and respect; otherwise, it may be construed as an accusation rather than an attempt to understand.

The following are examples of different types of questions one might ask leading to Jesus' ultimate question: "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15; Mark 8:29). General questions could include, "What would you say are Jesus' most important characteristics?" or "How did Jesus describe Himself?" More specific questions as appropriate follow-ups could be, "Was Jesus an actual, historical person?" or "Do you believe Jesus is God?"

Simple and understandable questions like these will help clear away the smoke and mirrors of verbiage and rationalization that one often encounters when engaging the culture. They will help dismantle the complex philosophies that set themselves up against the knowledge of the truth (2 Cor. 10:5). They will also help the Christian initiate discussion and be effective in contending for the faith.

— Tim Dahlstrom

NOTES

1. E.g., see Matt. 7:3–5; Mark 5:25–34; 1 Cor. 12:12–31; Gal. 3:1–5.
2. For an in-depth discussion of the power of questions, see Dorothy Leeds, *The 7 Powers of Questions: Secrets to Successful Communication in Life and at Work* (New York: Perigee, 2000).
3. Phillip E. Johnson, *The Right Questions: Truth, Meaning and Public Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 28.