

What Are They Really Asking?

Get to the heart of the question before you get to the answer.

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One of my colleagues told me the story of a professor, a brilliant man, whose father couldn't support the family. As a boy, this professor listened as the extended family argued over who was going to get stuck with raising him. In the middle of their arguing, feeling abandoned and unwanted, he slipped away to his room. There he found solace and escape in books.

His initial reaction to Christianity was to ask skeptical questions. He's not the only one for whom intellectualism becomes a way to mask pain. More than he needed his thinking corrected, he needed his heart mended. That brilliant boy did find healing in Christ, and today teaches seminary courses.

My ministry has brought me into contact with thousands of curious, questioning people. I've discovered that people ask spiritual questions because something in their lives isn't working. Uncertainty, fear, and pain provoke their questions. What they really want isn't information, but relief.

Most seekers' questions, whether intellectual or emotional, indicate

underlying issues. Choosing to believe in Christ carries major internal ramifications. Snappy, pat answers don't satisfy these inner struggles. Nobody wants a two-cent answer to a million-dollar question.

Behind every question is a person asking that question, and we need to minister to that person—if we can find him.

What do you think?

A great irony in Scripture prompted me to rethink how I answer seekers' questions. When the Son of God walked the earth, people came to him with dilemmas, doubts, and questions. He had all answers available to him. And yet he met their questions with questions of his own.

In Luke 10:25-26, "An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

Jesus didn't give the answer. Instead, he asked a question in return. "'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?'"

In Matthew 18:12, Jesus asked,

"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go look

for the one that wandered

off?" The heart of the parable is nothing but two questions!

In Matthew 22:41-46, Jesus conducted a little Bible study on Psalm 110 with the Pharisees.

"What do you think about the Christ?

Whose son is he?"

Through this conversation Jesus affirmed that the Christ would be more than an earthly son of David, but also the Son of God. Jesus' answer was to recite one verse and ask four questions.

He responded not to the question, but to the person behind the question.

I remember overhearing a college professor talking to a student about spiritual matters. The student claimed she didn't believe in God. Rather than argue, the professor asked a probing question. "What is this god like, the god you don't believe in?"

The student described a vengeful



9 Questions that Lead to Answers

Conversational tools for digging deeper.

Seekers rarely realize why they doubt or resist the gospel. When they raise spiritual issues, respond with some of these probing questions.

1. "That's an interesting question. What do *you* think?"
2. "What situation in your life makes you wonder about that?"
3. "Even though you don't know, if you had to guess, how would you answer?"
4. "Is there any answer to that you won't accept? Why?"
5. "What has led you to conclude that?"
6. "What information do you think would cause you to change your mind?"
7. "What's the strongest argument for those who disagree with you?"
8. "If everyone held that view, what would society look like?"
9. "If you found out you were wrong, what would be at risk? How would your life change?"

—JP

god, a god who looked to punish her as soon as she steps a little out of line.

By asking a probing question, the professor uncovered the underlying fears that caused the student's doubt. She wasn't looking for proof of God's existence. She was looking for relief from condemnation. Up to this point, only her claim that God didn't exist provided that relief.

"Well, I don't believe in that god either," said the professor. "Let me tell you about the God I do believe in, the God of Jesus Christ."

What to ask

I've found several specific questions effective at reaching the underlying issues. Now, when someone asks me a spiritual question, I almost

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always reply, "That's an interesting question. What do you think?"

This is the approach Jesus used when he asked, "What's written in the Law? How do you read it?" It gives me an opportunity to understand the person. It also affirms that I care for him or her, even more than I do about having the "right" answer.

Often, exhibiting care for the questioner is a greater ministry than answering the question.

Another good question: "What situation in your life makes you wonder about that?"

Kathy had tried Christianity before. It didn't work out. Her husband, Jim, was raised in a secular Jewish home. When I met them, they had lots of pointed questions about God, Christianity, and faith.

Jim, a logical man, said he wanted proof of Christianity's claims. *How should I answer his skeptical and sometimes antagonistic questions? I thought. Is he really after more information? Why is he asking in the first place?*

We could have spent our entire evening lost in theology. Instead, I

asked what situation prompted their questions. That's when we discovered they were uncertain about their children's upbringing. Should they be brought up Christian, Jewish, nothing, or a little bit of each? Knowing the key issue directed our conversation toward cooperation rather than theological debate.

Sometimes, however, a seeker's questions and thoughts do require challenge. For instance, many seekers today are struggling with Jesus' claim to be the way, the truth, and the life. "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

They ask, "Does Jesus really mean he's the only way? Isn't that kind of narrow-minded?"

"If I were to say that he really meant it," I reply, "would you rule out the possibility that it's true? Why won't you even consider that a possibility?" Such questions help them examine their skepticism.

When I was in college, students often boasted phantom objections and rationalizations to discount Jesus. Cutting through these smokescreens, I sometimes asked: "If you found out you were wrong, what would be at risk?"

Many times what keeps people from faith is fear of the consequences. Many of my college friends were living with their girlfriends. They knew if they accepted Christianity, they'd have to stop. So they put up diversions. As long as they could keep God looking silly and Jesus looking less than divine they could continue their unexamined lives. Their doubts had little to do with theology and everything to do with morality.

Once the objection is uncovered, it can be addressed with compassion and truth. "In Hebrews 11," I might say to one who fears what God will demand, "it says they who seek God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder. He rewards, not tramples, those that serve him. His character is not to make you miserable, but to give." ❁