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—D. A. CARSON

Research Professor of New Testament  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“*Questioning Evangelism* provides an absolutely unique blend of apologetic information and practical evangelistic advice. Newman is a skilled practitioner and this book is must reading for those who want to learn how to bring apologetics into evangelism in a biblical and relationally sensitive sort of way.”

—J. P. MORELAND

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“Asking questions, the right questions, is an essential skill needed by all Christians. Next time I share my faith, I’m going to be asking some ‘gospel-paving’ questions!”

—LIEUTENANT GENERAL R. L. VANANTWERP

Former Chief of Engineers, United States Army

President of the Officers’ Christian Fellowship

# QUESTIONING EVANGELISM



# QUESTIONING EVANGELISM

Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did

SECOND EDITION

Randy Newman

 Kregel  
Publications

*Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did*  
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To  
my Jewish mother,  
Rhoda Newman,  
who, at the ripe young age of seventy-five,  
found answers to her many questions  
and became a follower of Jesus,  
Savior, Rabbi, Redeemer, and Lord.





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# Foreword

THE EMAIL WAS SNARKY, with decidedly hostile and mocking undertones. At the end, the person—someone I didn't know—posed a pointed question: "If your God is loving, why does he allow so much pain and suffering in the world?"

I wasn't in a good mood when I read the missive. Part of me wanted to answer in a similarly negative style, but I quickly realized that wouldn't be the right approach. So I started to write a detailed five-point answer to the pain-and-suffering question—you know, the kind of theologically sound response you learn when you study Christian apologetics.

I paused. I deleted what I had written. Instead, I simply typed, "Of all the questions in the universe, why did you choose to ask that one?" I hit "send."

The answer came the next day. This second email had a totally different tone—the anger was gone, and the writer was much more sincere. He described his impressive academic achievements and how he had climbed to success in his career—only to lose his eyesight and health to diabetes. His job evaporated. His friends drifted away. Now he was living on welfare and food stamps. He was suffering from depression, loneliness, bitterness, and fear.

My heart went out to him. As for him, he responded that he felt heard and valued. Suddenly, the door was open to a fruitful spiritual conversation.

This, in short, is the power of a question. And that's what this book is about—how to share God's message of hope and grace through probing questions. That's right—sort of like Jesus did.

Nobody teaches the art of question-asking better than my friend Randy Newman. When you meet Randy in person, you're immediately drawn to his self-deprecating humor, his undeniable intellect, and his big heart for God and people—all of which bleed through the pages of this must-read book.

Years ago, Christian apologists would figuratively line up the targets of their evangelism and machine-gun them with facts, evidence, and arguments. That no longer works. For the most part, evangelism happens through relationships, which are better nurtured by provocative questions than a memorized gospel speech.

Let Randy teach you how to be a more effective ambassador for Jesus in the twenty-first century by doing more listening than talking, by validating the other person as being made in the image of God, and by respecting their spiritual journey.

And, of course, by asking good questions—like Randy learned from the Master Himself.

Lee Strobel  
Author of *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for Faith*  
Professor of Christian Thought  
Houston Baptist University

# Preface to the Second Edition

IT'S BEEN MORE THAN A DECADE since the original publication of *Questioning Evangelism*. During this time, our world has changed dramatically but our gospel has not changed at all. The environment in which we proclaim the good news has gotten more hostile but our message is just as good as ever.

At one point, I think Christians were motivated to share their faith because of guilt. That created a variety of ills. Then, there was a period when the primary motivation was triumphalism. We had more evidence and better arguments than the non-Christians around us. We wanted to win! That was even worse than the guilt-motivated days. But today I find more and more Christians who want to reach out because of their concern for lost people. They love them. I am hopeful that this gracious motivation will bear much fruit in spite of the current cultural hostility.

The most encouraging feedback I've heard about *Questioning Evangelism* has been when people say, "I've read your book and I now think, 'I can do that. I can ask questions and see how God uses me.'" I believe God will honor those efforts to engage people's hearts the way Jesus did—by asking questions.

One comment has been less encouraging. In reading my sample dialogues, some readers have responded, "Oh, I could never be that clever. I'm just not that brilliant on the spot." Well, I'm not either. Hardly anyone is. The reality is the sample dialogues aren't as spontaneous as they seem. We would all do well to brainstorm numerous ways we might enter dialogues with inquirers and practice articulating

what we might say. Don't let the sample dialogues discourage you from trying to engage, even if your words aren't as smooth as they seem in my examples.

One significant change in this edition is to the chapter on homosexuality. Since the first publication of *Questioning Evangelism*, our culture has turned radically pro-gay, and the Supreme Court of the United States has declared gay marriage legal in all fifty states. The Scripture's teaching about homosexuality, however, hasn't changed. If my chapter on homosexuality was mildly helpful in the first publication, it may be absolutely crucial in this second edition. I've updated the chapter and offered new resources for those who want more help with this issue.

I'm grateful to our Lord for how he has used *Questioning Evangelism*. May He be pleased to continue to do so as God's people pray for revival, reach out with humble boldness, and ask questions that may lead to different eternities for many, many people.

# Acknowledgments

THE WORD *GRATEFUL* PROMPTS joyful thoughts of and warm affection for the many people who encouraged me during the writing of this book—listening to my ideas, reading a chapter or two (or more!), helping me formulate the flow of an argument, or telling me what really didn’t connect. I owe a lot of thanks to Ellen Beauchamp, Jim Beavers, Barbara Brand, Mike Calkin, David Case, Dave Fossum, Mitch Glaser, Derrick Lovick, Mark Lundquist, Dave McGaw, Mike Metzger, Jim Roembke, Joe Scimecca, Stan Wallace, David Walnut, and George Selden for their time and suggestions.

I’m grateful to the members of the Pentagon Prayer Breakfast, Burke Community Church, Barcroft Bible Church, McLean Bible Church’s Life Builders’ class, and the faculty fellowships at George Mason University and the University of Maryland for allowing me to “try out” my ideas in messages to them.

Thank you to my greatest encouragers and challengers—Lin Johnson, Spencer Brand, Patrick Dennis, Don Carson, and J. P. Moreland—for taking the time to evaluate my writing and urging me to keep going.

I am delighted to say to my three sons—Dan, David, and Jon—that Dad will be more available now that this project is complete. It would be a display of God’s grace if this book helps you reach out to your peers—people I can’t even begin to figure out!

Most of all, I’m grateful to my wife, Pam, for loving me and cheering me on. At times, you believed in me and this work more than I did. Writing the chapter on marriage was a delight—because of you.





# Introduction

YOU MAY THINK THAT THIS BOOK is just plain weird. When it comes to evangelism, I think differently than a lot of people. I ask questions that other people don't ask. I come up with answers that many people don't think of. And answers that a lot of people find knock-down, drag-out invincible leave me unconvinced.

Maybe you think like I do. Or maybe you know people who ask the same kinds of questions that I ask. Or maybe our world has changed so significantly that we need to rethink evangelism.

The questions that I ask are not unreasonable. People often say, "Good question." When I say that certain answers are unconvincing, it's as if I've shouted something about the emperor's new clothes. And in response to the answers that I offer, people often tell me, "Gee, I wish I'd thought of that."

For a long time, I wondered if I should just keep quiet and cling to the proverb, "Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise" (Prov. 17:28 NASB). Wishing to find another option, I tried out my questions and answers on some real live non-Christians. In the course of writing this book, I met with dozens of amazingly kind and thoughtful people who were making progress on their own spiritual journeys. They were gracious in allowing me to join them for part of the trip. Some of them were students, a few were professors, and most were ordinary folks from various walks of life. One of the first people to share his uncertainties with me (and allow me to share some of my ideas with him) was a fireman who read Nietzsche!

Along the way, I received enough encouragement to write this book.

My prayer is that readers will be encouraged and aided in the task of telling others the best news ever announced. I'm not calling into question the validity of evangelism. I'm calling Christians to use questions in the venture of evangelism. I have two fears, however. The first is that some people might see *Questioning Evangelism* as a criticism of other books on evangelism or apologetics. Such landmark works as Josh McDowell's *More Than a Carpenter*, Paul Little's *Know Why You Believe*, or C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* come to mind. It would be the height of presumption for me to criticize such works. These books (and many others like them) are gifts from God to His church, and He has used them in amazing ways. I give away copies as often as I can, because they're very effective—with certain people.

I also like several newer books in the evangelistic arsenal. Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for Faith* are best sellers for good reason. They are well written, well reasoned, and compelling works that our Lord has used and will continue to use to bring many into the kingdom.

A diverse audience, though, requires diverse approaches. *Questioning Evangelism* offers another approach. If Jesus teaches us anything about evangelism, it's that He used a variety of methods with a variety of people.

Any evangelistic approach, though, requires three skills. The first and most basic involves *declaring* the gospel, including the ability to clearly and concisely articulate the message of salvation. A tool such as Bill Bright's "The Four Spiritual Laws" is helpful in presenting the message clearly while avoiding unnecessary distractions or confusing rabbit trails. Declaring the gospel also includes the sharing of one's own story or testimony. Every Christian needs fluency in articulating how the Lord changed his or her life and the difference that change makes daily.

The second evangelistic skill is *defending* the gospel. Anticipating common questions, acquainting oneself with helpful discoveries from the past, and planning how to deliver this information in a logical sequence has to be part of "always being ready to make a defense" (1 Peter 3:15 NASB).

The third skill—and this is where *Questioning Evangelism* fits in—is built upon the foundations of declaring and defending the gospel. That skill is called *dialoguing* the gospel. Often neglected, difficult to master, but absolutely essential, this skill of giving and taking—asking questions and bouncing ideas back and forth—might be just what our postmodern audience needs. We need all three skills if we're to be Christ's ambassadors in the twenty-first century.

My second fear is that some people might view *Questioning Evangelism* as a technical handbook. If so, they might be tempted to use its approach to evangelism in a cookie-cutter, mechanical way. Doing so, however, would prove unfruitful and frustrating. I don't want people to respond to my examples by saying, "I've got to memorize this so the next time someone asks me that question, I'll say these words, use these phrases, ask these questions," and so forth.

Instead, I hope that readers will develop a different way of thinking about people, their questions, and our message. And because of that difference, our evangelistic conversations will sound less content/persuasion driven and more relationship/understanding driven. They'll sound more like rabbinic dialogues than professorial monologues. They'll be an exchange of ideas that lead both participants to the truth of the gospel. For one participant, it will be the first arrival at that point; for the other participant, it will be a rediscovery and a new appreciation of the message of the cross.

The goal of *Questioning Evangelism* is to help people know *how* to think about an issue more than *what* to think. This book will help followers of Jesus to develop their minds ("the mind of Christ") more than their methodologies, giving readers a sense of what to *say*. More important, though, readers will grow in confidence, knowing what to *ask*, because this book is about questions—questions that Christians can ask to move the conversation in a Christ-ward direction, questions that non-Christians are asking (either directly or indirectly), and questions that Christians can use as answers!

Some of the questions that people ask today are the same old questions that people have asked for millennia. For example, "Why does a good God allow evil and suffering?" But people today ask that question

in the wake of terrorist attacks and school shootings, making the question less sterile than it might have been in the past.

Some of the questions have been asked before, but the temperature in the tone is hotter now. When someone asks, for example, “Can Jesus really be the only way to God?” it might be more an accusation than a sincere inquiry. After all, the eternal state of the proverbial “heathen in Africa” is no longer the issue. Rather, it refers to the Hindu who lives next door, the Muslim whose desk is next to yours, the Jew who coaches your son’s soccer team, or the New Age, crystal-clinging, tie-dyed T-shirt-wearing unmarried couple living together down the street.

Some of the questions *are* new. Twenty years ago, few people brought up the issue of homosexuality in the context of an evangelistic conversation. Now, however, people raise that question often, and often word it as an attack: “Why are you Christians so homophobic?”

A number of questions that lurk within evangelistic chats are unspoken. At one time, only a few rogue fraternity brothers had the boldness to ask why they should stop sleeping with their girlfriend(s). And even then, their questions were more defense than honest inquiries, with a fair amount of guilt mixed in. Today, thanks to the sexual revolution, marital fidelity and chastity are on the defensive and modern questioners might wonder (aloud or in their jaded hearts), “What’s so great about marriage?” or “If I believe in this God you talk about, will I have to go along with His [your?] antiquated, stifling, and unhealthy ideas about sex?” or “Why should I have sex with just one person for the rest of my life?”

Whether the questions are old or new—or angry varieties of either—we should be more engaging and less confrontational in our sharing of the good news. We must find new hinges upon which to swing open new doors. We must be disciples of our Lord and rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, so that more and more people will join us in that great gathering of worshippers around the Lamb. If He sees fit to use this book toward that end, giving you confidence along the way, I will be grateful.

Part 1

WHY ASK QUESTIONS?



# Why Are Questions Better Than Answers?

I'LL NEVER FORGET HIS NAME.<sup>1</sup> It was one that I'd never heard before—Artyum. He was from Ukraine and was possibly the most sincere seeker I've ever met. I just didn't know what to do with him. We struck up a conversation on the center lawn of the American University in Washington, DC, on a spring-like day in November. It wasn't supposed to be that warm. But there we were, Artyum and I, basking in the sunshine, when the calendar said that we should have been inside sipping cups of hot chocolate.

We talked about the weather, classes, hometowns, and things like that. Then he asked me what I did on campus. When I worked for an organization with the name Campus Crusade for Christ (now known in the United States as Cru) and people asked, "What do you do?" it didn't take long to steer the conversation toward the gospel. It's one of the perks of being a crusader.

As a trained evangelist, I steered our chat to the point where a little green booklet became the focal point of our conversation. "Knowing God Personally" is an adaptation of Bill Bright's "The Four Spiritual Laws" and is a good evangelistic tool for sharing the gospel. I still believe that as much as ever. But what happened that day at the

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1. Portions of this chapter originally appeared in Randy Newman, "Stop Answering Questions," *Discipleship Journal*, January/February 2002, 24–29. Unless otherwise noted, all scenarios are drawn from actual encounters and many are composites.

American University changed my thinking about some of the ways we do evangelism.

I'd been trained and had conducted seminars in how to introduce the booklet, how to progress through the booklet, how to avoid distractions during the booklet, how to bring someone to the point of decision at the end of the booklet, and how to walk him or her through that eternity-changing moment of conversion after concluding the booklet. I could state the advantages of using such a tool (and there are many). I could show the drawbacks of just winging it and not using such a focused tool (and there are many). And I could share stories of how God has used it to lead many people to the Savior.

I read the first point, "God loves you and created you to know Him personally." I don't remember pausing at that point. I don't think I even breathed. But somehow Artyum interrupted.

"What do you mean when you say the word *God*?" he wondered aloud. "And what do you mean when you say the word *love*? And, most importantly, how do you know all this is true?"

It was a difficult moment for me. All of my training had told me to sweep away any and all questions with, "That's a good question. How about we come back to that when I'm done reading the booklet?" That line had worked well many times for me. The inevitable result was that the questions would be forgotten and never brought up again. That's because many, maybe most, questions that are asked early during an evangelistic presentation are not real questions—they're smoke screens. The questioner is trying to avoid the conviction that is sure to come when one confronts the gospel.

So they stop the presentation before it gets uncomfortable with, "Well, we can't really believe the Bible; it's got too many contradictions in it," or "There are so many religions in the world, how can anyone know which one's right?" or a million other pretentious comments that *should* be swept away with the "that's a good question" line.

But Artyum's questions were different. They weren't smoke screens. I know the difference between an honest inquirer and a truth avoider. Artyum's questions were foundational. Could I progress to the second page in the booklet and read, "People are sinful and separated from



God,” if he was stuck on the words *God* and *love*? What would be in store for us when we hit the word *sin*?

I mentally reviewed the background data that I’d gathered earlier in our chat and connected it to our present discussion. Being from Ukraine, Artyum had been reared in an atheistic, communist world, reading Nietzsche and Marx and thinking deeply about life. He was a history major who loved philosophy and was bothered by the intellectual shallowness displayed by most Americans. He wasn’t annoyed by my initiation of evangelism. He genuinely wanted to work through his questions. Unlike me, however, he didn’t feel any pressing need to work through the booklet. He did feel, however, a sense of importance about working through real interaction about weighty questions.

What followed was a ninety-minute discussion, revolving around questions that strike at the foundation of faith: “How do we know what we know?” “What do we know for certain?” and “What difference does it all make?” Toward the end of the conversation, I was asking more questions of him than he was of me.

Artyum helped me rethink the task of evangelism. *Questioning Evangelism* is the result of that process. And in all of the examples in this book, Artyum’s is the only name that I haven’t disguised. Although I refer to real people in real conversations, all other names have been changed. But I’ve kept Artyum’s name, hoping that someday he’ll see this book and contact me, telling me that he’s come to faith in Christ. He didn’t that day on American University’s lawn. I lost track of him soon after the weather returned to normal November temperatures.

## Why Are We Frustrated?

I came away from that conversation both excited and frustrated. Communicating at that level of intensity and truth seeking was invigorating. That level of excitement was relatively new, but the frustration was all too familiar. Another nondecision. People don’t as readily “pray the prayer” with me as they do with famous speakers

I've heard. Those natural evangelists are always sitting down next to someone and sharing the gospel. And they always lead every person to a salvation decision. (And it's always on an airplane!)

Some people have told me that my lack of evangelistic fruit results from lack of prayer. I certainly don't pray enough, but I wonder if that's all there is to it. Other people have told me that I don't push hard enough in "closing the sale." I don't know how to respond to that; the gospel isn't a product that we sell. On introspection, I've wondered what I haven't said to work the same magic as so many others.

I've found that I'm not alone in my frustration. In fact, frustration might be the most common emotion that Christians associate with evangelism (followed closely by guilt, confusion, and despair). Our frustration is multifaceted. We're frustrated that our message doesn't yield more decisions, genuine fruit, cultural impact, or advancing of God's kingdom in the way Jesus talked about.

First, we just don't have as many evangelistic conversations as we know we should. The message that has gripped our hearts and forms the centerpiece of our lives remains unspoken, unshared, and unproclaimed. We miss opportunities to tell people what Jesus means to us. Our culture's secularism has silenced us when we should be sharing. We wonder why the topic that is so often on our minds is so seldom on our lips.

Second, most of us don't hold a candle to people who are gifted by God as evangelists. And when we actually do step out in faith and share Christ, not as many people as we'd like bow their heads and pray "the sinner's prayer." So hearing about the successes of a Billy Graham only adds to our frustration. Instead of motivating us to be bold, the success stories discourage us. That's not an excuse, though. Paul told Timothy, who was a timid non-evangelist, to "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Tim. 4:5). So we find ourselves clinging to the promise that God forgives even the greatest of sinners—assuming that *sinners* means those who are evangelistic failures—and hoping for a method of evangelism for non-evangelists.

Third, we're frustrated by the lack of lasting fruit. If you've ever

“led someone to Christ” and then later found that person totally uninterested in spiritual growth, you know the pain I’m referring to. True, not all the seeds in Jesus’s parable landed on good soil. Still, we wonder why some plants spring up and then wither in the sun, or on the rocky soil, or under the distractions of this world. We wonder why, for all of our evangelistic efforts, the percentage of born-again Christians in our country has remained stagnant for more than thirty years. Yet the percentage of Mormons, Muslims, and purchasers of New Age crystals has grown.

Fourth, we’re frustrated by our lack of saltiness, that is, cultural impact. If we’re supposed to be the “salt of the earth,” a preservative, why is our culture decaying?

These frustrations are realized in an environment of such religious diversity that many of us question some of our basic assumptions about Christian belief. Different religions are not theoretical concepts practiced in other countries; they’re practiced by the people next door.

On one of my son’s basketball teams, for example, is a boy who wears a turban in accordance to his Sikh religion’s commandments. This same son’s biology lab partner is a boy named Mohammed, who fasts during Ramadan. On another son’s basketball team are two boys: one attends Hebrew school in the evenings in preparation for his Bar Mitzvah, and the other studies Arabic as part of his weekend schooling as a Muslim. They’re all best friends at public school during the weekdays.

Our local library advertises seminars on yoga, meditation, crystal usage, and the teachings of Mormonism.

The reality of pluralism (the existence of differing points of view) tempts us to consider the assertions of relativism (the validity and truthfulness of all points of view). In our most honest moments, we wonder how we can hold to Jesus’s claim that “no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Our frustration and intimidation, then, lead to a condition that borders on evangelistic paralysis, or what one speaker referred to as “spiritual lockjaw.”

## Is There a Better Way to Evangelize?

We can have better results from our evangelizing. Our efforts can produce more fruit, advancing the kingdom further than has been recently achieved. A better way exists, and it looks, sounds, and feels more like Jesus, the rabbi, than like Murray, the used-car salesman. It involves more listening than speaking, inviting rather than demanding a decision. Perhaps the most important component to this kind of evangelism is answering questions with questions rather than giving answers.

Maybe I think this way—responding to questions with questions—because I’m Jewish. I grew up with dialogues that went like this:

RANDY: How’s the weather down there?

GRANNY BELLE: How could the weather be in Florida in the middle of July?

Or

RANDY: So, how have you been?

UNCLE NAT: Why do you ask?

Or

RANDY: How’s your family?

AUNT VIVIAN: Compared to whom?

I’d like to think, though, that I answer questions with questions because I’m following the example of Jesus. It’s uncanny how often our Lord answered a question with a question.

A rich man asked Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” That question was a great setup for a clear, concise gospel presentation. I can almost hear a disciple whispering in Jesus’s ear, “Take out the booklet.” How could Jesus not launch into the most

perfect model for every evangelistic training seminar for all time? But how did he respond? He posed a question, “Why do you call me good?” (Mark 10:17–18).

When religious leaders asked Jesus if it was right to pay taxes, Jesus referred to a coin and asked, “Whose image is this?” (Matt. 22:20). When the Pharisees, “looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus,” asked Him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” Jesus’s response was a question: “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?” (Matt. 12:10–11).

I once did a study of how Jesus answered every question that was asked of Him in all four gospels. Answering a question with a question was the norm. A clear, concise, direct answer was a rarity.

So when I answer a question with a question, I’d like to think I’m following the example of Jesus, but to be honest, I most likely do it because I become tired. After years of answering the questions of nonbelievers, I grow tired of my answers being rejected.

At times (far too many, I’m afraid), I’ve answered questions with biblically accurate, logically sound, epistemologically watertight answers, only to see questioners shrug their shoulders. My answers, it seemed, only further confirmed their opinion that Christians are simpletons. My answers had, in fact, hardened them in their unbelief rather than softened them toward faith. I realized that, instead of moving people closer to a salvation decision, an answer can push them further away. Rather than engaging their minds or urging them to consider an alternate perspective, an answer can give them ammunition for future attacks against the gospel.

So I started answering questions with questions, and have gained far better results.

Once a team of skeptics confronted me. It was during a weekly Bible study for freshmen guys that we held in a student’s dorm room. The host of the study, in whose room we were meeting, had been telling us for weeks of his roommate’s antagonistic questions. This week, the roommate showed up—along with a handful of like-minded friends.

The frequently asked question of exclusivity arose, more an attack than a sincere inquiry.

“So, I suppose you think all those sincere followers of other religions are going to hell!”

“Do you believe in hell?” I responded.

He appeared as if he’d never seriously considered the possibility. He looked so puzzled, perhaps because he was being challenged when he thought that he was doing the challenging. After a long silence, he said, “No. I don’t believe in hell. I think it’s ridiculous.”

Echoing his word choice, I said, “Well, then why are you asking me such a ridiculous question?”

I wasn’t trying to be a wise guy. I simply wanted him to honestly examine the assumptions behind his own question. His face indicated that I had a good point, and that he was considering the issues of judgment, eternal damnation, and God’s righteousness for the first time in his life.

The silence was broken by another questioner, who chimed in, “Well, I *do* believe in hell. Do you think everyone who disagrees with you is going there?”

I asked, “Do you think anyone goes there? Is Hitler in hell?” (Hitler has turned out to be a helpful, if unlikely, ally in such discussions.)

“Of course, Hitler’s in hell.”

“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, people’s sinfulness, and Jesus’s atoning work ensued. Answering questions with questions turned out to be a more effective, albeit indirect, way to share the gospel.

Another time when questioning worked better than answering was during a lunchtime conversation with an atheist philosophy professor. He was the faculty advisor for the campus philosophy club, and I was a campus minister for Campus Crusade. Together, we had cosponsored a debate about the problem of evil, and afterward we met to evaluate how the event had gone.

After some discussion of such things as how we could have publicized the event better, and what topics we could address in future forums, I asked him his opinion about the content of the debate.

I realized that I was in way over my head and that nothing I could articulate about the Christian perspective on evil could top what some brilliant philosophers had said the previous evening. But I wanted to see if I could get the conversation out of the philosophical realm and onto a personal level. I was concerned about this person's soul.

He told me that he still thought that Christians failed to present a decent answer for the problem of evil. So I posed the question to him. After confirming that he was an atheist, I asked, "What's your atheistic explanation for why terrible things happen?"

He paused and finally said quietly, "I don't have one."

I told him that this wasn't just some academic issue for me. As someone with a Jewish heritage, I had to wrestle with the reality of the Holocaust. I recounted my last visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and how emotionally difficult it was for me. I asked him again if there was an atheistic way to make sense out of the Nazis' slaughter of six million of my people.

Again, his answer was a nonanswer.

I told him that the Christian answer to the problem of evil definitely has its shortcomings and that I, for one, am not intellectually or emotionally satisfied with it. But I also told him that my incomplete answer was better than no answer at all. The rest of our lunchtime consisted of a productive and respectful tête-à-tête that moved us closer to each other and, I hope, moved him closer to seeing some flaws in his own worldview.

Answering a question with a question, then, often has significant advantages over using direct answers. It brings to the surface the questioner's assumptions. It also takes the pressure off you—the one being asked—and puts the pressure on the one doing the asking. Shifting the burden of the response is important because as long as we're on the defensive, the questioners are not really wrestling with issues. They're just watching us squirm.

For example, the chief priests and the teachers of the law once challenged Jesus: "'Tell us by what authority you are doing these things,' they said. 'Who gave you this authority?'" He replied, 'I will also ask

you a question. Tell me: John's baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin?" (Luke 20:2–4).

The gospel writers give us insight into the real motivations of the religious authorities. After a short consultation together to work out a maneuver, they realized their predicament. Given John's popularity, if they answered that his message was from heaven, then Jesus would ask them why they didn't believe him. On the other hand, if they said that John's message was "of human origin," that is, nothing more than a mere man's ramblings, they'd have a riot on their hands. So they told Jesus that they didn't know. Jesus showed them that their insincere nonquestion deserved an appropriate nonanswer: "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things" (v. 8).

Responding to a question with a question paves the way for a concept that the questioner might not otherwise consider. When I asked my dormitory interrogators if they believed in hell, I paved the way for the concept of divine judgment. Many ideas that are central to our gospel message—God's holiness, people's sinfulness, Christ's atoning work on the cross, and people's responsibility—are alien today for many people. Questions bring these concepts into clearer focus for consideration and even acceptance.

Jesus's conversation with the woman at the well (John 4:1–26) fits this pattern although he never actually asked a question. The woman's notions of righteousness, sin, and worship had to be challenged before she would accept Jesus's way of seeing those concepts. Without His challenging comments, it is doubtful she ever would have arrived at the point of saving faith.

On a practical note, answering a question with a question might alleviate some hostility. When people ask questions that are really attacks in disguise, responding with a question reflects the heat. People usually don't like the temperature and tend to adjust the thermostat accordingly, which helps create a more productive conversation.

To be sure, a direct answer is at times preferable. Some questioners are sincere and would benefit most from a clear, concise statement of what the Bible says. On quite a few occasions, Jesus didn't beat around the bush. Consider, for example, His direct answer to the teacher of



the law who asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Mark 12:28).

But more and more we should hold back our answer, and with a question pave the way to receptivity. When your coworker asks in an accusatory tone, “Why do you still believe in God in light of people dying of AIDS?” ask him, “How do *you* explain so many deaths?” Or when your cousin asks, “Why are you so narrow-minded as to believe that all Buddhists are going to hell?” ask her, “Have you become a Buddhist?” or “Have you studied Buddhism enough to become convinced that its adherents are worthy of heaven?” or “What have you found about Buddhism that impresses you so?” Those questions might be a better way to respond than to indignantly quote, “No one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6 NASB).

When your neighbor asks, “Why do you think that Jesus was anything more than just a good moral teacher?” don’t take out your Lord-liar-lunatic diagram just yet. Wait a few seconds and ask her, “What makes you think that Jesus was a good teacher? Have you read a lot of His teachings? Which messages impress you the most about Jesus’s teaching ability? What would you say was Jesus’s main message?”

Recently, a pastor urged his congregation to open the door to evangelism by challenging the prevailing slogans of our day. “The next time someone at work says, ‘Image is everything,’” he told them, “respond, ‘No, it’s not! Image isn’t everything! The glory of God is everything!’”

Although I agree with his theology, his methodology may be flawed. It would be better to respond with a puzzled look and a one-word question, “Really?” After getting the coworker’s attention, a follow-up question could be, “Do you really think that image is everything?” I think that many people would see the point. Then a few gospel-paving questions could be added: “What do you think *is* everything? What would you say is the most foundational thing in life?”

## What Is Rabbinic Evangelism?

Answering a question with a question is part of a different style of sharing the good news, one that I call rabbinic evangelism. Rabbis,

using this style of debate, train their disciples to think about God and life. The method was used in Jesus's day and is similar to what happens today in training schools called "yeshivas." This method is sometimes called "pilpul."

Moishe Rosen, the founder of Jews for Jesus, encourages this style of dialogue in his book, *Share the New Life with a Jew*. Rosen shows how seeing both sides of a question can help people think, which is a necessary but often neglected component in the evangelism process. One of his illustrations is worthy of imitation:

A rabbi posed a question to a Gentile inquirer, trying to illustrate this different style of thought.

"I will ask you some questions," he said, "to see if you can logically come to the right answers. Two men fell down a chimney. One was dirty, and the other was clean. Which one washed?"

"The dirty one, of course," replied the Gentile.

"Wrong!" exclaimed the rabbi. "The dirty one looked at the clean one and thought to himself, *Amazing! We just fell down a chimney but we didn't get dirty*. But the clean man saw the dirty man, presumed that they were both dirty, and immediately went to wash up."

The Gentile smiled. "Oh, I see."

"No, you don't," said the rabbi. "Let me ask you the second question: Two men fell down a chimney; one was clean and the other—"

The Gentile was puzzled. "You already asked me that question," he said.

"No," contended the rabbi. "The other one was dirty. Which one washed?"

"The clean one," said the Gentile.

"Wrong again," said the rabbi. "It was the dirty one. He looked at the clean man and thought, *It's amazing that he should fall down the chimney and remain clean*, whereupon he looked at his own hands and realized that he was dirty,

and went and washed. And now, for my third question. Two men fell down a chimney; one was dirty and the other was clean. Which one went and washed?”

The perplexed Gentile shrugged. “I don’t know whether to say it was the dirty one or the clean one.”

“Neither!” said the rabbi. “The whole question is ridiculous! How can two men fall down a chimney together, and one come out dirty and the other come out clean?”<sup>2</sup>

Although this illustration has elements of absurdity, such an exercise teaches people to think critically. Such rabbinic reasoning is needed and should be used today in evangelism as we engage the hearts and minds of non-Christians.

I believe that Paul used such a style of evangelism in his synagogue preaching, which is mentioned many times in the book of Acts. In Acts 17:2–3, for example, we read, “As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures, *explaining* and *proving* that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,’ he said” (emphasis added; similar statements are found in Acts 17:17; 18:4, 19; and 24:25).

Those three verbs—*reason*, *explain*, and *prove*—convey the give and take that occurred in those sessions. In the original Greek, the first verb, *reason*, has an intensity that may well be best stated in the *Revised Standard Version* translation—“he *argued!*”

Perhaps those arguments sounded something like this:

PAUL: So, you see that Jesus is the Messiah, just as our Holy Scriptures foretold.

SYNAGOGUE TEACHER: How can that be? He was a blasphemer!

PAUL: What makes you say such a thing?

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2. Moishe Rosen, *Share the New Life with a Jew* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 47.

SYNAGOGUE TEACHER: He claimed to be the Holy One, blessed be His name.

PAUL: So? Doesn't the Scripture say that the Messiah will be divine?

SYNAGOGUE TEACHER: Where does it say that?

PAUL: In Isaiah, the prophet, he's called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." In Micah, we're told that he has always existed, "from days of eternity." King David called him "my Lord." Who could fulfill these Scriptures except God Himself?

SYNAGOGUE TEACHER: True. But this Jesus you speak of—he died. How can the eternal One, blessed be His name, die?

PAUL: Don't our own Psalms tell us, in chapter 16, that our Messiah would come back from the dead?

SYNAGOGUE TEACHER: There you go again with that resurrection stuff. Why do you always come back to that?

PAUL: Because I'm still waiting for you to show me the dead body. Have you found it yet?

SYNAGOGUE TEACHER: Who let this man in here?

## What Rabbinic Evangelism Is *Not*

Rabbinic evangelism is not simply a rational, logical argument. We must avoid the danger of thinking that a person's reception of the gospel is simply based upon his or her ability to reason. If that were the case, nonbelievers would only need to be convinced of the truthfulness and sensibility of our message and they'd walk the aisle.

But faith is more than intellectual assent to the facts. Far too many Christians have come away from an evangelistic presentation shaking their heads in wonder at the stupidity of their unsaved friends. “What could be holding them back?” they wonder.

If we think that the gospel is simply a good deal that any reasonable person would accept, we’ll not only be amazed at how many people turn it down, but we may actually distort the message in the process of proclaiming it. We might strip the gospel of its supernatural and convicting elements, talking about the offer of a free gift, or going to heaven, or living forever, or feeling the freedom of forgiveness, or the need to make a decision as if these were parts of a benefits package. To be sure, these are important components of the gospel message. But without the context of God’s holiness, the horror of our sinfulness, the need for repentance, and the necessity of the cross instead of just a guidebook to better behavior, we’ll terribly misrepresent the gospel. People need to hear the bad news in our message before they can appreciate the good news. Not only do the minds of nonbelievers need to be persuaded, but also their knees need to buckle.

For years, I presented the gospel using a pen to help illustrate. I wanted to ensure that my listeners understood Ephesians 2:8–9: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

To explain what was meant by the word *gift*, I would hold out a pen and tell the person, “I’d like to give you this pen as a gift.” Then I’d ask, “What would you need to do to make this pen yours?”

“Take it,” they’d say. Everyone got this question right.

But no one, absolutely no one, ever got the point that I was trying to make. I finally figured out why. Salvation isn’t a pen!

Certainly, salvation is free. It is a gift that must be accepted, not worked for or earned. But the reason I’d accept the gift of a pen is different than the reason I’d accept the gift of salvation. I don’t need a pen. I could find something else to write with. I could even live my entire life without using a pen. I probably already have a lot of pens, ones that I might like better than the one I’m being offered. I

might accept a pen as a token of the giver's generosity or as a display of friendship.

But accepting salvation is different. If I correctly understand what I'm being offered by the Messiah's death on a cross, I know that it's something that I can't live without (eternally, that is). I'm lost without it. I'm dead in my sins. I must accept this free gift to avoid total and eternal alienation from a holy, righteous God. I need to accept such an unspeakably gracious offer with the acknowledgment that I deserve exactly the opposite. So my attitude of accepting the gift is one of humility and repentance. Illustrating such a profound offer by giving someone a pen misrepresents the heart of the message.

Rabbinic evangelism also is not a sales pitch. If we were to try to convince someone to "buy" the gospel, we'd shy away from some difficult words that need to be said. Confronting a prospect with unpleasant truths doesn't work in sales, but it is essential in evangelism.

My encounter with Warren brought this reality home to me. As a successful businessman, Warren was frequently invited to luncheons sponsored by evangelistic organizations. He had heard the testimonies of many top executives, and he had been given a library full of evangelistic books. He knew the arguments for the historicity of the biblical documents better than some seminary professors. He was more convinced than anyone I had ever met that Jesus actually did rise from the dead! And his car was filled with evangelistic recordings that people had given him for the many long road trips required in his work.

But Warren just couldn't commit. He knew all of the right answers, and he knew the *shoulds*, *musts*, and all of the other urgent verbs used in late-night pleas from evangelistic friends. So what was Warren's problem? Why had he left so many would-be evangelists in his wake, shaking their heads and wondering what was holding him back? Why had the sales-style approach not worked?

Warren's "problem" was his girlfriend. She kept saying yes. She was more than willing to sleep with him, even though he'd made it clear to her that he wasn't interested in marriage. She kept hoping that her "yes" would someday lead to his "I do." Although they lived

four hours apart, nine years later their situation hadn't changed. He kept staying over at her house on the weekends and then returning to his place on Monday through Friday. Neither wanted to leave their high-paying jobs, so "for economic reasons," their situation remained the same.

One day I had lunch with Warren at a Mexican restaurant. I asked him (me and my pesky questions!), "Would you marry her if economics wasn't a factor?" He didn't even pause between chips. "Why should I?" he responded to my question with a question. He had all that he wanted from this relationship—sex and companionship on the weekends and freedom from obligation during the week.

I explained that he also had another kind of freedom, one that wasn't all that good: freedom from integrity. He was joining himself physically and emotionally with a woman he was unwilling to commit himself to volitionally (that's what marriage is). By doing so, he was creating a disintegration in his soul that prevented his being a whole person. That's why the Creator of sex is so negative about the expression of sex outside the commitment of marriage. Sex isn't just a physical act. When we divorce it from other components of our personhood, we adulterate ourselves.

I explained this to Warren, knowing that these concepts are so rarely expressed. An element of rabbinic evangelism is that it confronts where a sales pitch won't. Yet some of it was getting through. I could tell; he stopped eating the chips.

His immorality prevents his turning to Christ. As John puts it in the third chapter of his gospel, "People loved darkness" (3:19). That's why Warren hasn't come to Christ even though he keeps going to (and enjoying!) those evangelistic businessmen's luncheons. I suspect that he never will come to faith until he breaks up with or marries his girlfriend.

This book offers a solution for our evangelistic frustration. I'm suggesting that we do more than just "proclaim the simple gospel" and wring our hands when the results don't come pouring in. I'm proposing a style of evangelism that is a dialogue more than a sales pitch. I'm pleading for conversations that lead to conversions, rather

than presentations that lead to preconceptions. I'm encouraging the use of questions more than the use of answers. The apostle Paul found validity in adding reasoning, explaining, and proving to his arsenal of evangelistic weapons. So should we.