



BROADCAST TALKS

The Importance of Asking Questions in Talking about Jesus

by Andy Bannister



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BROADCAST TALKS presents ideas to cultivate Christ-like thinking and living. Each issue features a transcription of a talk presented at an event of the C.S. Lewis Institute.



A

few years ago, I was at a workplace Christmas dinner, during my student years. I was doing some holiday work for a company in London, and they had a Christmas dinner, at which I made some comments sort of foolishly, outing myself as a Christian. The guy next to me at the table in the restaurant looked at me and said, “Oh, I hate Christians!” Now I can be a bit slow on the uptake, but I figured he was probably an atheist. And I thought, *Well I’m next to this gentleman for the whole evening, so I’ve got nothing to lose.* So I looked at him and said, “Thank you for that. Tell me, why do you hate Christians?” And he said, “Well, the reason I hate Christians is that you lot are: anti-progress, anti-environment, antireason, antiscience, antigay, antitrans, antiwomen...” He had about ten other *anti-s*, things I never heard of. I almost thought I needed to take notes.

Anyway, he finally finished the list. What’s worse is that at this point, other people around us at the table were looking. And he’s looking at me angrily, other people are looking on, my heart was racing, my adrenaline needle was in the red zone, and I thought to myself, *What do I say?* And then this little thought popped into my head, and I looked at him and said, “What was the last thing you said?” And he said, “You Christians are antiwomen,” to which I replied, “Interesting. I don’t think Christians are antiwomen, but hypothetically, if we were, what would be wrong with

that?” I wish I had taken a photograph, because he sort of did a gold fish impression, his mouth opened and closed, and then finally he said, “Well it’s just wrong, isn’t it?” And I said, “Oh, come on. You’re obviously fairly brilliant since you’re working for this company, you can do better than that.” And he thought about it for a moment and said, “Okay, it’s wrong to discriminate against people on the basis of their gender.” I said, “Well that’s very impressive; you’re using quite long words there, but you just said the same thing. Okay, why is it wrong to discriminate against people on the basis of their gender?” He thought for a moment, and then he offered me another reason, and again, I just asked, why?

Now I have a seven-year-old and a four-year-old in the house, I’m very used to short words that begin with W and end with question marks. I deployed a few at him on that particular evening. So he would give me reasons, and I would say, why? We went to and fro, to and fro, and after about two or three minutes of this, the gentleman looked at me and said, “This is very frustrating. I know that it’s wrong to discriminate against people on the basis of their gender, but I can’t tell you why.”

I said, “Interesting, isn’t it? I’m a Christian and I can give you a very good reason why it’s wrong. I would go to the beginning of the Bible where it says that God created everybody, male and female, in His image, they have value and dignity. But here you are, struggling to give an answer for this.”

I confess I didn’t ask a follow-up question. Afterward I thought what I should have done is try to find out more about what he did at work. I wish I could tell you the conversation ended with him weeping in repentance on the floor in front of me. That would have been marvelous. But it did end with him saying, “This has been really fascinating. I hadn’t thought about some of this much before, and I’m sorry if I was a little bit aggressive.” I said, “A little bit aggressive? That’s an understatement.”

Four Things Questions Do Really Well

Notice what I did in that conversation. It was quite a difficult conversation, one where I almost wished the ground would have opened up and swallowed me. But actually, all I did in that conversation in the restaurant was — I asked questions. Questions are a very, very powerful tool in evangelism, a very, very powerful tool, for a number of reasons. There are four things that I think questions do really well. Whether you're in a restaurant setting or talking to friends at home or with colleagues at work, classmates if you're a university student — questions can help in evangelism because they do four things really well.

The first thing questions do really well is that they can *expose motives and assumptions*. Sometimes it's very easy when we have a friend or a colleague who perhaps leaps in with an objection to our Christian faith, that either we panic because we don't know the answer, or, sometimes worse, we do know the answer and we leap straight in and give it, but we haven't diagnosed why our friend has asked this. A really good example of this is if someone says to you, "I couldn't possibly be a Christian because how could you believe in a God who is all powerful and all good there's all this suffering in the world?" It's probably quite important to know whether your friend is asking that question because they've seen a YouTube video from an atheist who's told them that's a really good question to throw at Christians or if they're asking because their sister has just been diagnosed with leukemia. Possibly important to know which it is. I find it very helpful, when a friend or a neighbor or someone I'm talking to raises objections to my faith, to begin by saying, "That's a really interesting question. Why do you ask it?" Sometimes you get the story behind the question, and you can take some of the heat out of it if it's an angry question. Then you can begin addressing the person and not just the question. Questions help you do this.

The second thing questions help us do is this: *questions help create a conversation*. One of the things we have sometimes forgotten to do —

or forgotten how to do in some parts of the church — is to have natural conversations with our friends about spiritual things.

A couple of years ago, my wife and I were on holiday in one of our favorite parts of England, the English Lake District, a beautiful part of the country. Over the course of the week there, we became friends with another family. We met them in the local children’s playground. So we became friends with this other family across the week. We hung out a bit, we went walking together, and so forth. During that week, they found out we were Christians, and we had one or two conversations about faith, but the last night was fascinating. We were having a meal together and, over the curry, the wife in this other couple looked across the table at my wife and me and said, “I can’t figure you guys out. You’re clearly into this Jesus thing, but you’re not crunchy.” I said, “Sorry, we’re not what?” She said, “You know, crunchy, crunchy Christians.” I said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Is this some kind of cannibalistic snack?” She said, “No, you know, the kind of Christians you can’t talk to about anything, because when any subject comes up, there are ooohs and ahhs, and sort of sharp intakes of breath. It feels like you’re sort of tap dancing through a minefield, and so you never talk to them. But you guys aren’t like that. You seem normal.”

My takeaway from that was, isn’t it interesting that her interaction with Christians had told her that Christians were not safe people to have conversations with. And I wonder whether perhaps for some of us that’s the reaction of our friends and our neighbors and our colleagues and our classmates. And if we take an interest in people, if we ask good questions, if we start conversations, then maybe we might as Christians be known as people who are interesting to talk to rather than people from whom other people want to run a mile away when they find out that we have a faith in Jesus. Questions can help create conversations.

Third: *questions force other people to think*. Sometimes when we’re perhaps thinking about sharing our faith with our friends, our neighbors, our colleagues, we can have in mind that it’s us as Christians who have to



do all the heavy lifting, and our skeptical friends, our atheist friends, our agnostic friends don't have to do any of this. But asking good questions, I think, makes our friends do some work as well. So, for example, whenever I meet somebody who says to me, "Andy, I'm an atheist," often one of my stock responses is to say, "Atheist tells me what you don't believe, but what DO you believe? I don't believe in the tooth fairy, but I don't introduce myself to people as an a-tooth fairier. I don't get invited to those kinds of parties." And so, asking questions makes the other person have to do some thinking as well.

And then, fourth: *asking questions takes the pressure off you*. One of the reasons sometimes we as Christians are often — if we're honest with ourselves — afraid of the idea of evangelism, is that we feel it's such effort, such work, that we've got to do all the talking and all of the effort, all the guiding of the conversation. Well, first, that ignores the work of the Holy Spirit and the importance of prayer and the spiritual disciplines, and it also ignores the fact that a good conversation requires both people to take a role. Asking questions takes some of the pressure off *our* role.

The Main Reason Questions Are Helpful in Evangelism

But the main reason I think questions are helpful in evangelism, in the holiday season and any time of year — I'll give you some examples from the holiday season — is because Jesus was the Master Question-Asker. When you read the Gospels, you see that Jesus asked questions all the time. In fact, I think somebody has calculated that if you go through the Gospels and count the number of times that Jesus either asks a question or responds to a question with a question, you get something like three hundred questions being asked. And what I'd like to do for this next chunk of the evening is to take a look at two examples from the Gospels. In the first, we'll see how Jesus does it. In the second, we'll see what Jesus does and apply it to a contemporary example.

Let's start with an example from Mark's Gospel. In Mark 10, we have a very famous interaction between Jesus and the gentleman who has come to be known as the rich young ruler. It's a very famous story, many of you have heard this before, but let me read you a couple of verses. Mark tells us:

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

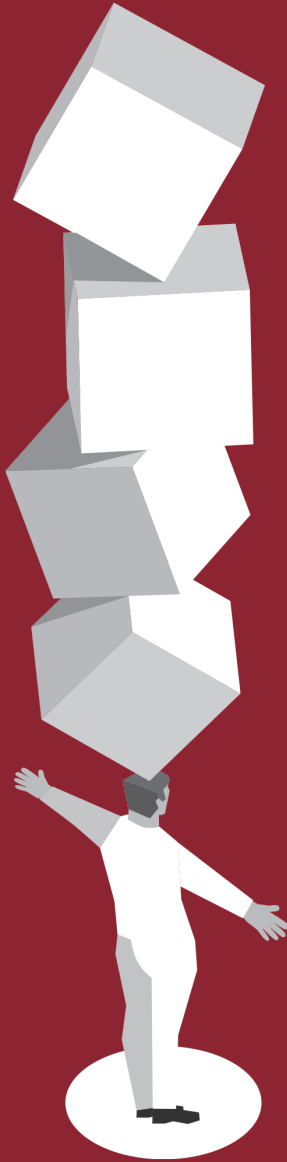
"Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "No one is good — except God alone." [vv. 10:17–18 NIV]

We'll pause right there.

Now many of you have heard this story before, but I wonder how often, as you've read this story or heard it read, you've thought to yourself: *What an absolutely bizarre response Jesus makes here!* It's not heretical to have those kinds of thoughts. The Gospels were designed to make us think and provoke us, and this is a very strange response.

So why does Jesus do this? Why does Jesus not say to this young man, "I'm the Son of God. Follow Me.?" Why does He not say, "Come to the Alpha course that Peter, James, and John are leading at the Sea of Galilee next Wednesday. There will be loaves and fishes for everybody.?" Why does He do this?

Well, think about this for a moment. If you were to take your average non-Christian friend — think of a neighbor, maybe a family member, a friend, a colleague, if you go to a very liberal church, the pastor — and you say to them: "Look, grant me two things. Grant me that God exists, number 1, and grant me, number 2, that there's a heaven. I know you don't believe those things, but just pretend there's a God and there's a heaven, what do you think you need to do to get there?" What do most of my non-Christian friends think is the answer to that question: if there's a God, if there's a heaven, how do you get there?



Yes, most people think the answer is: Be good. “Good-Personism” is the most common religion on the face of planet Earth. And this is what this young man is saying to Jesus. He’s basically saying: *Well, you look like a good teacher, you look like a good rabbi or religious leader. You’re clearly a good man, so, Jesus, you’re clearly going to heaven. So how do I get there?* So this is a whole nest that Jesus has to untangle and of course He could have untangled it by giving a sermon or a parable or a lecture or any of those things, but He untangles it with one simple question. When He says to that young man, “Why do you call me good? Only God is good,” Jesus is effectively saying to the young man: *You know, you’re absolutely right. All good people do go to heaven, but there’s a problem. Only God is good, so follow the logic: All good people go to heaven, but only God is good, so who gets to go to heaven? Only God. I’m afraid your application to join the Trinity has been turned down this morning.*

Of course this also opens up, as we talked about, questions exposing assumptions. If we read on in this passage, we discover the real issue for this young man is money and wealth and possessions, and Jesus gets to that by using a question to expose the hidden assumption. So that’s just one example of how Jesus does it.

Let’s take another example from the Gospels, this time from Matthew’s Gospel. Again we’ll look at what Jesus does here, and then we’ll take the method that Jesus uses and apply it to a contemporary example and see how we might use that very same technique in a situation we might find ourselves in, such as on a holiday occasion.

So Matthew 22, a very famous story. We’ll read the first half, make some comments, and then read the second half. So Matthew tells us:

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap [Jesus] in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax

to Caesar or not?” [vv. 15–17]

Many of you may know the context here, first-century Israel, an occupied land by the Roman armies for over a hundred years by this point, and the Roman armies were considered by most pious Jews to be evil, occupying oppressors. So if you paid your tax to the Romans, you’re considered by pious Jews to be collaborating with the enemy. On the other hand, if you didn’t pay your tax to Rome, the Romans took a fairly dim view of that; it was considered to be an act of rebellion, and it would lead very quickly to arrest, torture, and execution. The Pharisees probably think this is an incredibly clever trap they’ve sprung on this rebellious rabbi from Galilee. If he says, *Yes, pay your tax*, He’s compromised in the eyes of the crowd, He loses all authority. If He says *no*, then of course they can just call the Romans and get Him arrested.

Now, how does Jesus answer? This question is not about tax, you see, this question is about compromise. Was it okay to compromise morally? That’s sort of the underlying issue. And so what Jesus does here is absolutely brilliant. Matthew tells us:

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” [vv. 18–21]

With those two tiny little questions, Jesus redefines the entire conversation. It’s no longer about fiscal policy; it’s now about what we give to God, which is what He really wants to talk about. I wonder what would have happened if one of His questioners had said to Him, “Well okay, Rabbi, what belongs to God?” I wonder if Jesus might have replied, “Well, whose image is on *you*?” Just a thought.

Using a question like this, to clarify or redefine an issue, has all kinds of contemporary applications. So let's think of one. Let's imagine that you're at your family's Thanksgiving meal. All kinds of uncles and aunts, extended family are all gathered around the table. Sitting next to you is a distant aunt you haven't seen for some time. She's in town, and so the family invited her. And suddenly your distant aunt looks across the table at you and says, "Oh, you're still into that Christianity thing, aren't you? Tell me, do you think abortion is wrong?" Now, you're probably one of the few Christians in your family. There are agnostics and skeptics and all kinds of things, so at least half the table are not Christians, and she's asked you the abortion question, so loudly that everybody else has heard. You can see other members of the family who don't share your Christian convictions looking at you with a face like thunder. What do you say to this question? Do you think abortion is wrong? Of course you could simply come out and say, "Yes, it's wrong, absolutely, it's wrong." So then, what is your aunt and anybody else around the table who doesn't share your Christian convictions going to think? If you simply say, "Yes, it's wrong," are they going to think, *My word, this is the wisest, the most informed, the most reflective, the most thoughtful, the most sensitive answer to a difficult ethical issue I've ever heard!?*

Probably not, right? They're probably going to think words like: narrow-minded, bigot, intolerant, fundamentalist, naive. Why is that? Why might they think of those adjectives?

In the eyes of the culture, what is that particular issue, abortion, always framed in terms of? It's always framed in terms of the woman's right to choose, right? And what do we call somebody who restricts someone's right to choose? We have words for them. We call them fascists; we call them dictators; we call them oppressors. So here's a thought for you. If answering the question that you've been asked, the way it's been asked, is going to give the wrong impression of God, the wrong impression of the gospel and the wrong impression of you, there is possibly something wrong with the question. So do the Jesus thing and redefine it.

What if you looked at your relative and said to her, “Thank you for asking me such an important question. It’s a hugely important question. Thank you for asking me and giving me the opportunity to say what I think. But before I answer it, I wonder if I might ask you a question. Because it would help me understand where you’re coming from and help me to give an answer that hopefully you can find helpful. My question to you is this: Tell me, when do you think it’s okay to take the life of a wholly innocent person?”

Unless your aunt is a psychopath — in which case the best thing would be to move to the other end of the table where you’re probably safer — unless she’s a psychopath, she’s probably going to look at you and say, “Well it’s never okay to take the life of an innocent person.” To which you can say, “That’s very helpful. I agree with you. I don’t think it is ever right to take the life of an innocent person. And now we agree on that. Now we can talk about the really interesting question: What is actually in the womb? Is it an innocent life, or is it just a random collection of atoms and particles and molecules? If it’s an innocent life, as you’ve said, we can’t just snuff it out without thinking about it. But if it’s just a collection of atoms and molecules and bits and pieces, why is it even an ethical question? Why is it even up for discussion?”

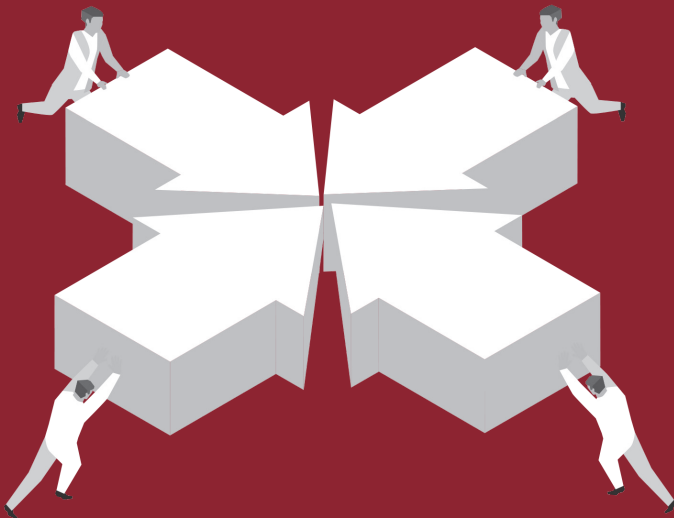
If you take that approach — again, it doesn’t guarantee that your aunt will have a weeping repentance on the floor in front of you afterward — it opens up the chance that you will have a more helpful, more substantive conversation than merely heated arguments where you end up shouting at each other and the entire Thanksgiving meal descends into complete chaos. The right answer for the wrong question is often unhelpful. And so take the Jesus approach and redefine the question.

You see, there are so many big questions out there in our culture. There are big ethical questions like abortion, sexuality. There are questions about the fundamentals of the Christian faith, and there are people who think we believe all kinds of things. There are people who have doubts

and issues and challenges to our faith, and sometimes these big questions can be scary. They can be quite frightening when we're confronted with some of those questions. And of course, during the holiday season, I think we are particularly nervous about embarrassing our family members, ruining the mood, spoiling the party, having people never invite us back into their homes again. Or, of course, we're afraid of making the gospel look bad, making Jesus look bad, and so on.

But the really encouraging thing, the exciting thing, is that if we learn to use the Jesus method and ask really good questions, then they are a powerful tool to help us both to overcome fear and to handle these sticky situations in which we as Christians sometimes find ourselves.

[A video of the complete version of this talk is available at:
<https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/Holidays.>]



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