



BROADCAST TALKS

Three Powerful Questions You Can Use in Evangelism

by Andy Bannister



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Andy Bannister is the Director of the Solas Centre for Public Christianity, speaking and teaching regularly throughout the UK, Europe, Canada, the USA, and the wider world. From universities to churches, business forums to TV and radio, he regularly addresses audiences of both Christians and those of all faiths and none on issues relating to faith, culture, politics, and society. He holds a PhD in Islamic studies and has taught extensively at universities across Canada, the USA, the UK, and further afield on both Islam and philosophy. He is an author of several books including: *Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?*, *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (or: *The Dreadful Consequences of Really Bad Arguments*), and *Heroes: Five Leaders from Whose Lives We Can Learn*. When not traveling, speaking, or writing, he is a keen hiker, mountain climber and photographer. He is married to Astrid and they have two children, Caitriona and Christopher, and live in Dundee in Scotland.

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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.



In the Volume 5, Number 4 edition of Broadcast Talks, Andy Bannister explained the importance of asking questions when talking about Jesus. In addition to pointing out some of the things questions do really well, he observed that Jesus was the “Master Question-Asker.” In this edition of Broadcast Talks, Bannister shares three powerful questions that you can use in evangelism.

What I really want to do is share with you three questions. Three questions to use as a sort of evangelistic tool kit, three little questions you can learn to ask that will help you out of a whole variety of situations. They are simply these:

What do you mean by that?

Why do you think that?

Have you ever wondered...?

What Do You Mean by That?

To illustrate how they work, let’s take some scenarios. Let’s begin with the first question: *What do you mean by that?*

Let’s imagine that you’re a very sociable type, and you want to reach

out to your community at Christmas so you decide in mid-December that you're going to have your neighbors over for Christmas drinks. Maybe some of you do this. My wife and I try to do this most years. It's a great way to get to know people, invite all the neighbors around, for mulled wine and minced pies, for example. And it's great. You've got all the neighbors in the house, they've all come round, and it's all going really, really well. It's a lovely evening, and you're thinking, *This is wonderful. It's a great idea. We should have done this years ago!* And then you're chatting to one neighbor in your lounge, and the conversation is going quite well when suddenly, maybe it's something you've said, or maybe it's the massive, great big black Bible you have on the shelf, the giveaway. Your neighbor figures out that you're one of those people who actually believes this stuff, and your friend looks at you and says: *Oh, you're not one of those people who takes Christmas seriously, are you? I mean, come on, nobody takes this stuff seriously. Believing in God is just like believing in Father Christmas. It's a nice story for children, but there's no evidence that God exists, is there?* And, of course, he's asked the question rather loudly and you can hear the other conversations in the room dying away, and people are looking sideways.

And I guess you're thinking, what do you say? You're the host. You can't be too aggressive, or it's going to look very, very bad. You want to give some kind of answer. Other people are listening. What do you say? How do you handle this thought that God is like Father Christmas, there's no evidence, and so on. Well, rather than give a forty-five-minute lecture on the subject, this is where the *What do you mean by that?* question rides to the rescue.

What if you simply looked at your neighbor, your friend, and said, *You know, that's a really interesting perspective. I just wonder, when you say that belief in God is like belief in Father Christmas, what do you mean by that? I know people who became Christians in adulthood. I don't know anyone who started believing in Father Christmas in adulthood. You know you can go to the library and take out serious books on the Christian faith, but I don't know any serious books on belief in Father Christmas.*

What do you mean by that?

Or you might pick up on the word *evidence*. You might say, *You know, you said there's no evidence that God exists. What do you mean by that? What evidence would you need to see that might convince you that there might be something to God after all?*

Those are just open-ended questions that might start a discussion. You might even pick up on the word *God*. You might say to your friend, *You know, it's interesting that you used the word God. What do you mean by that word?* Because different people mean different things by the word *God*. One of the best-selling atheists in the world, Richard Dawkins, at Oxford University, wrote a book, *The God Delusion*, that has sold something like seven and a half million copies. I always say Richard Dawkins may not believe in God, but his bank manager and his agent certainly do. But Richard, in his book *The God Delusion*, says he doesn't believe in a sort of psychopathic, mega-maniacal sort of bully who lives in the sky flinging lightning bolts at people. I remember reading that in Richard's book and thinking, well I don't believe in that kind of god either, so that makes me an atheist, I guess. But what kind of god does your friend not believe in? And maybe, just maybe, that might give you the opportunity to describe the God that you do believe in throughout the course of the conversation. Saying, *What do you mean by that?* would just open the conversation up in a potentially, relatively nonthreatening way. So that's the first question.

Why Do You Think That?

The second question, *Why do you think that?* works in a similar way. Say, *What do you mean by that?* and pick up on a term or a word or a phrase your friend has used and try to dig a little bit into the conversation. *Why do you think that?* begins to press a little bit into why the friend or colleague or person you're talking to believes what they do. Let's imagine another scenario.

Let's imagine perhaps that this time it's at work. Maybe it's the run

up to the holiday season. You're in the office and it's all going well. There's a bit of banter going to and fro with your colleagues, and you happen to mention in passing that you're going to a carol service that evening and you're doing one of the Bible readings. And one of your slightly acerbic, atheistic colleagues pipes up and says, *Abh, good grief. Not the Bible. It's bad enough at the best of times, but particularly at Christmas you can't escape from it. I hate carols. I hate Christmas. I hate the Bible. It's just full of legends and myths and fairy tales. It's all a load of rubbish*, and so on and so forth. Let's imagine this is not just your colleague. Let's imagine it's your line manager. This is someone who's superior to you at work, so if you get too lippy, you might score a ten out of ten for evangelism but you might get demoted. So what do you say? Other people in the office are looking.

So this person has hacked the Bible, said some skeptical things—fables, legends, myths, and so forth. What do you say? And of course there are other colleagues listening. Again, rather than going on the defensive or simply running away, what if you said to your friend, or your colleague, or your boss, what if you simply said words to the effect of, *You know, thank you for that perspective. I've heard other people say similar things. But I just wonder, could you tell me how is it you've come to the conclusion that the Bible is a collection of myths and fables and legends and fairy tales? What led you to believe that?* From experience of having actually done that, one of two things will happen. The first possibility is that your colleague may say to you, *Well, it's because of this reason*, and then he or she will give you a reason. At that point, that's brilliant because you can now do one of two things. If you have the time and the conversation's got the space to breathe and you know the answer, then by all means you could explore it with your friend, saying, *That's a really good perspective. I just wonder maybe if you might consider...*, and you might share your perspective. If there isn't time, or you don't know the answer, that's no problem. Go away and find the answer. Look it up on the internet, talk to a friend, or to your pastor. Get the answer and then, the next week, you go back and knock on your friend's office door and say, *Hey, you know that*



great question you raised the other week—I'm so grateful you raised it, because as a Christian I love to be thought-through. I hadn't thought about that question, and you really made me think about it. You know, the great thing is that I found the answer. Would you like to hear what it is? You might get the door slammed in your face. Or you might get an opportunity to share it with him. That's one possibility.

The much greater possibility is that your colleague will say, *Well everybody knows...* That is shorthand for *I read it on Twitter this morning*. Because your friend might be very brilliant, that doesn't mean they know anything about the Bible and theology, and they're simply serving up secondhand skepticism. Again, there are a couple of ways forward from there. You could take the conversation forward if there's time and then ask a couple more questions, or you could just let it sit. But what will be interesting is that all of your fellow workmates who heard that conversation will have seen what's happened. Your colleague was quite rude about your faith, you asked the question, asked them to support what they said, and they had nothing, just crickets, and that may well open the opportunity for conversations with colleagues who heard what you just said. All you've done is to ask your friend to justify their position.

You see, I think we live in an age where people have forgotten that when you advance propositions you really ought to give reasons. In fact, somebody said that advancing a proposition or making an argument is a lot like building a house. When you build a house, you should build the walls and then put the roof on the top. If you try and build the roof with no walls, you're going to have it looking rather foolish. People do this with arguments and propositions. They'll say they believe things and give no reasons for them. As Christians, I think that with our friends, our colleagues, our skeptical neighbors, and so forth, without being rude, without being aggressive, we can simply challenge people when they say things or make assertions. We can challenge them and say, *What are the reasons you believe this? Why do you believe that to be true?* And do that in a gentle, engaging way and see what happens.

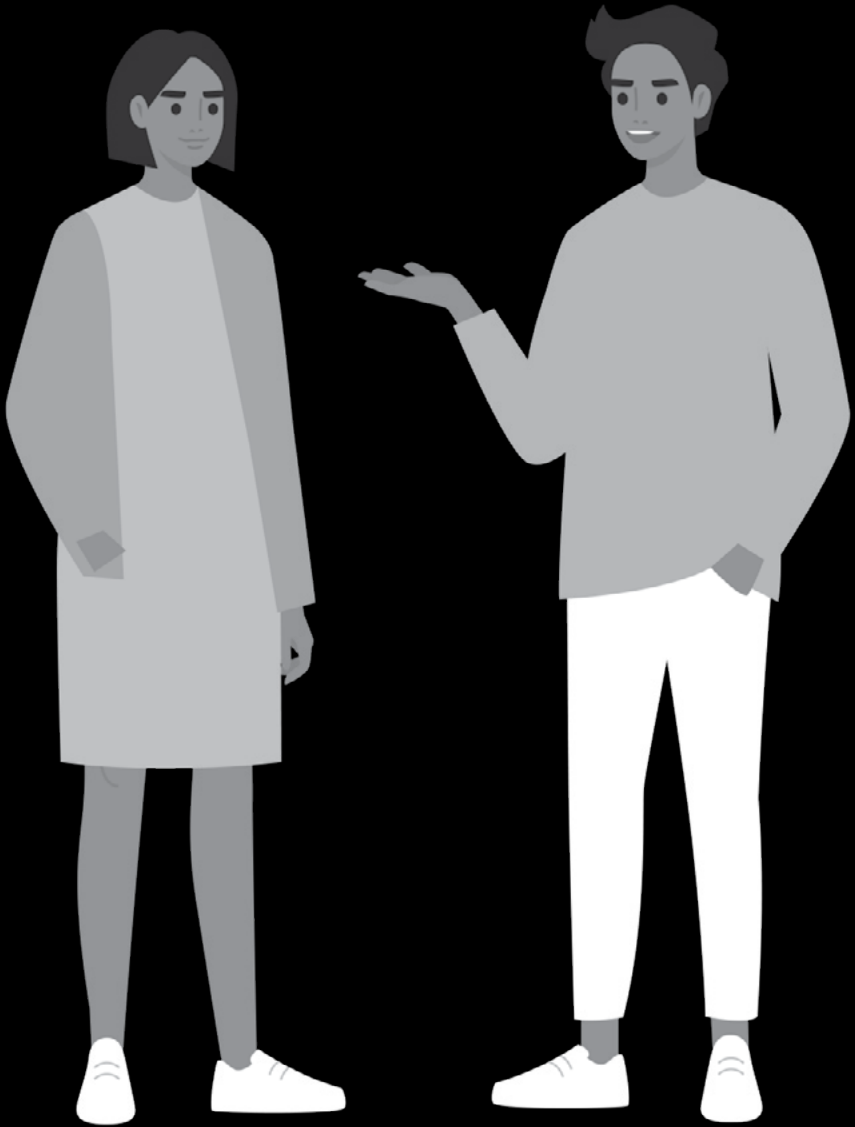
Have You Ever Wondered...?

So those are the first two questions on my list: *What do you mean by that?* and *Why do you think that?* And that brings us to the last question, which is slightly different: *Have you ever wondered...?*

I've done versions of this seminar about two hundred times, in different contexts around the world, and when I began teaching this seminar, I used only the first two questions: *What do you mean by that?* and *Why do you think that?* And people would come up and say to me, *Andy, I can see how those questions would work really well if you've got skeptical friends, atheist friends, you know, quite aggressive friends. But all of my friends are utterly apathetic. They don't care about spirituality. They don't care about faith. Trying to have spiritual conversations with them is rather like trying to nail Scotch mist to the wall. How do you start spiritual conversations with people who have absolutely no interest?* In fact, I remember that a woman once said to me after one of these seminars, *You know I would pay money to have Richard Dawkins live next door to me because then at least I would have an angry atheist whom I could work with rather than people who are utterly apathetic.* How do you start those kinds of conversations?

This is where the *have you ever wondered?* question rides to the rescue. Basically, how the *have you ever wondered?* question works is that it encourages you to think about or look for the things in your friend's life, things they're passionate about, things they care deeply about, but things that really make sense only if God exists, and you use them to gently begin a conversation. Let me give you one non-holiday-related example.

One of my favorite activities is to go walking in the mountains. I love going walking in the mountains and trying not to fall off them. I regularly have conversations with people on mountaintops that go along these lines: *What an absolutely incredible view. Isn't this very, very beautiful?* But then the follow-up question: *Why do you think it is as human beings, we are so drawn to natural beauty? Why is it that we spend so much time and effort, those that love the outdoors, you know,*



lugging ourselves up great lumps of rock to stand at the top and look at the view? If human beings were only designed by evolution for survival and reproduction, there must be easier ways to survive and reproduce than to lug ourselves on top of mountains or to invest huge amounts of energy exploring far-flung parts of the planet, and so on. But why are human beings so drawn to natural beauty? Of course, if God exists, it makes a lot of sense.

But then I think something similar can be said at this time of year, the weekend after next, when you'll be celebrating Thanksgiving. We don't celebrate Thanksgiving in the UK; we're a very unthankful nation. I lived in Canada for six years; of course in Canada, we celebrate Thanksgiving there at a different time of year, because the Canadians are thankful for *different* things. One Canadian said to me, *Not being American is what they're thankful for*. That's very, very rude. I told that to an American friend who simply smiled and said, *Isn't it quaint that these Canadians think they've got a country?* Revenge is sweet.

Thanksgiving is an interesting time of year, because the whole idea of being thankful is fascinating. I remember once reading one writer on this very subject who wrote these words; I forget who first came up with this quote. Many people have repeated it. But it's a fascinating idea, that *the greatest problem for many people is not that they have nothing to be thankful for, but that they have no one to be thankful to*. It's an interesting idea at this time of year as we enter a season where we're encouraged to be thankful and to show gratitude. I've spoken to many, many secular friends over the years who have admitted this challenge—of who it is we're thankful to and what they should do with this desire that they, and we, have deep down to be grateful for something, for the gifts and the blessings in our lives. These are questions that naturally bubble up at this time of year. And the *have you ever wondered?* question is simply a gentle way of looking for these kinds of experiences, looking for these passions in your friend's life and gently suggesting that *have they ever wondered?* might lead somewhere.

This is actually a very C.S. Lewis type of approach to evangelism.

C.S. Lewis had this lovely little phrase. He talked about *signs of transcendence*, looking for these signs in your friends' lives where the gifts of God are sort of breaking into their lives in different ways. Your friends experience beauty. Your friends experience gratitude. Your friends experience love and meaning and purpose and significance and wonder and so on. And your job as a Christian is to say to your friends, *Have you ever wondered where those things come from and where those things point?*

The Gospel Is Itself an Answer to a Question

So three questions, then: *What do you mean by that? Why do you think that? and Have you ever wondered...?* As I say, questions are a powerful, powerful tool in having natural conversations about Jesus, about the gospel, about faith at any time of year, but certainly in the holiday season. And they're powerful, not least because, as I say, we're following the example of the Master question asker, Jesus Himself, but they're also powerful for one last reason I want to leave you with, and it's this: I don't know if you've ever noticed this—but I think one reason that questions are powerful in evangelism is because the gospel is itself an answer to a question. What do I mean by that? Well, in Mark 8 we have this fascinating little episode that Mark reports to us. He says:

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." [vv. 27–28 NIV]

I don't know about you, but I have a sort of cinematographic mind when I read the Gospels. There are certain scenes in the Gospels where I can almost close my eyes and see it in my mind's eye. And this is one of my favorite ones. I can picture the scene: Jesus and His disciples, walking through the countryside, and Jesus asks one of those

innocent questions that's going to go somewhere quite devastating; the disciples don't see this coming. He turns to His disciples and says: *Who do the crowds say that I am?* And the disciples, you know, I think are having some fun at this point, *Oh, Jesus, You'll never believe those crowds; they don't know anything, Lord. Some people think You're John the Baptist; some think You're Elijah.* You know, *we met this guy in Cana of Galilee who thought You were Donald Trump.* The list goes on and on. And I love to imagine Jesus having a laugh about those crowds, aren't they funny, those crowds. But then suddenly, out of the blue, of course Jesus turns the tables, doesn't He?, if you know what comes next. He turns to them and He says, *Well okay, that's the crowds' version; what about you lads? Who do you say that I am?* And that's the point at which I can imagine all the disciples falling quiet. There's no more laughing and banter; there's sort of an embarrassed silence. I imagine the disciples nudging each other, you know:

Thaddeus, you tell Him.

No, I don't speak in the Gospels, mate.

Thomas, you tell Him.

I'm Thomas. I don't know anything.

Finally, Peter speaks up, and it's Peter who has the courage to say: *Well, You're the Christ. You're the Messiah. You're the Son of God.*

Who do you say I am? That's the question that Jesus asked the crowds. He asked individuals. He asked religious leaders. He asked the disciples. It's a question that Jesus asks every one of us, and it's the gospel invitation. *Who do you say that I am?* Our answer to that determines so many other things. And I think that because the gospel is a question, *Who do you say that Jesus is?*, that's why gently using questions in evangelism with our friends, our neighbors, and our colleagues is so powerful. Because as we use questions, we help to bring them face to face with the ultimate question of Jesus and who He is.

What do you mean by that?

Why do you think that?

Have you ever wondered...?

Three powerful questions. Take them away, try them out during the holiday season. Try them outside the holiday season, and see what happens as you start using questions in evangelism. My prayer is that as you do that boldly, or maybe falteringly at first, as you draw your friends into conversation, you'll discover that the Lord can work through you in incredible ways, just as He works through questions in the Gospels.

[A video of the complete version of this talk is available at: <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/Holidays>. The video includes the subject matter of both this edition of *Broadcast Talks* and last year's Volume 5, Number 4 *Broadcast Talks*, as well as Q&A.]



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