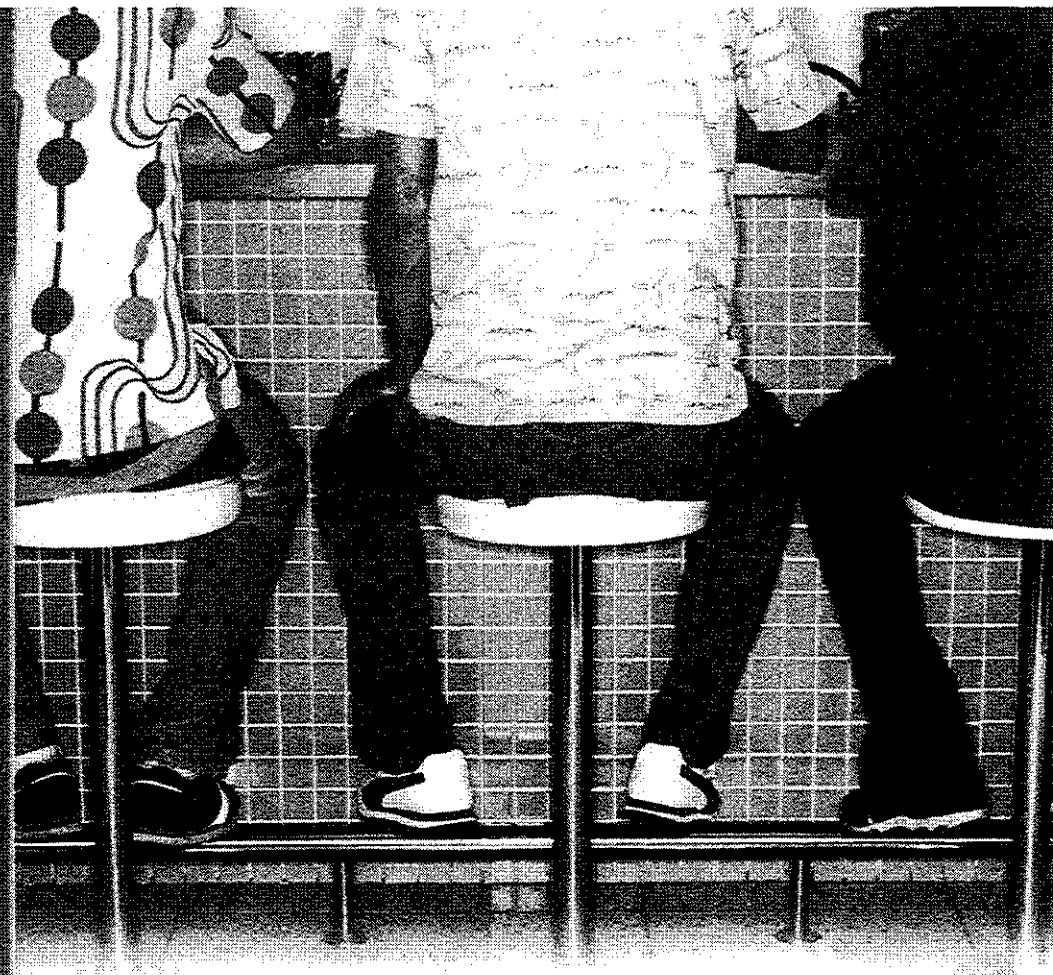

Questioning Evangelism

Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did

Randy Newman

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,*[1] Paul Little's *Know Why You Believe,*[2] or C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*[3] 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 new books in the evangelistic arsenal. Lee Strobel's two books, *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for Faith,* are bestsellers for good reason.[4] 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. The use of a tool such as *The Four Spiritual Laws*[5] 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

1. Josh McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1977).
2. Paul Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Madison: InterVarsity, 1978).
3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).
4. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); and idem, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).
5. Bill Bright, *The Four Spiritual Laws* (Orlando: New Life Publications, 1965).

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 ability in *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 the collapsing World Trade Center towers, 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 tee-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 worshipers 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?

CHAPTER 1

Why Are Questions Better Than Answers?

I'LL NEVER FORGET HIS NAME.[1] It was one that I'd never heard before—Artyum.[2] 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, D.C., 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 working for an organization with the name Campus Crusade for Christ and people ask, "What do you do?" it doesn'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 "The Four Spiritual Laws," and is a good evangelistic tool for sharing the gospel.[3] I still believe that as

1. Portions of this chapter originally appeared in Randy Newman, "Stop Answering Questions," *Discipleship Journal*, January–February 2002, 24–29.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all scenarios are drawn from actual encounters and many are composites. In all cases, except the story of Artyum, the names of the individuals have been changed.
3. Bill Bright, *Knowing God Personally* (Orlando: New Life Publications, 2000).

much as ever. But what happened that day at the 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 smokescreens. 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 smokescreens. 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 did 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 about which Jesus talked.

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 nonevangelists.

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 to which I'm referring. True, not all the seeds in Jesus' 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 of whom attends Hebrew school in the evenings in preparation for his Bar-Mitzvah, and the other of whom 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' 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' 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 portrait is this?" (Matt. 22:17–20). When the Pharisees, "looking for a reason to accuse Jesus," asked Him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" Jesus' 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. 12:9–12).

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 likeminded 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' 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 afterwards we met to evaluate how the event had gone.

After some discussion of such things as how we could have publicized the event better, topics we could address in future forums, etc., 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 view of 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 man'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 from men?'" (Luke 20:1–8).

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 "from men," 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' conversation with the woman at the well (John 4:1–26) fits this pattern. The woman's notions of righteousness, sin, and worship had to be challenged before she would accept Jesus' way of seeing those concepts. Without His questions, 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 12:28–31).

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's 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 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' teaching ability? What would you say was Jesus' 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' 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 *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?"[4]

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 his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures, *explaining* and *proving* that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,' 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*'s 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!

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

PAUL: What makes you say such a thing?

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, Almighty-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 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 with which to write. 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 and 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'd heard the testimonies of many top executives, and he'd 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'd ever met that Jesus actually did rise from the dead! And his car was filled with evangelistic tapes 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 *should*, *must*, *can't wait*, 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 to whom he was unwilling to commit himself 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, "Men 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.

CHAPTER 2

Solomonic Soulwinning: What Does the Book of Proverbs Teach Us About Questions?

OUR FAMILY JOINED A GYM RECENTLY. We became part of that vast horde of Americans who sweat, pump iron, and count calories. We use terms such as *reps, sets, pecs, aerobic capacity,* and *optimum heart rate.* We get on bikes, treadmills, and cross-trainers, and watch little LCD screens that tell us how our cardio-fitness ratio is developing.

Before getting educated about the weight control process, I sank in discouragement when I saw that, after thirty minutes of huffing and puffing, I'd burned off only 378 calories (but who's counting?). I thought, *All that sweat and I didn't even make a dent in last night's cheesecake!* After a little work on a calculator, I concluded that I'd need 14,247 consecutive hours on these machines to make me look like the people in the gym's promotional material. Something had to be wrong with my figuring.

I later learned that there's more to the cardio-fatburning-exercise process than just the number of calories you burn while you're on the equipment. That's, in fact, only a small part of the equation. During a gym-sponsored seminar designed to help us get the most from our workouts, I learned about increasing my rate of metabolism. If you work out consistently, the presenter said, you increase the rate of your normal metabolism—your everyday, relaxed, sitting-on-the-couch-watching-television burning of energy. With increased metabolism,

you could burn off last night's dessert more efficiently even while sitting still (or even sleeping!). Consistent periods of exercise change the way your body works at all other times.

A similar dynamic works in our spiritual lives. If we think that Christian spirituality is just what happens while we're reading the Bible, praying, or singing worship songs in church, we have a truncated view of faith. We wouldn't be alone, however, in our error. Many Christians crowd their schedules with religious activities and minimize all of the "secular" stuff to be more "spiritual."

A healthier, more biblical pattern includes spiritual disciplines—Bible reading, prayer, worship, fasting, solitude, and other such exercises—but results in a transformation of all of life. We take on Christlikeness and grow in wisdom and compassion (among other things), and then these qualities change the way we do everything else—including the "secular" stuff.

The task of evangelism looks different if we think in this transformed way. Rather than trying to learn all of the right words, have all of the right booklets, anticipate all of the right questions, and memorize all of the right intros and Scripture, we should approach evangelism with wisdom. This means that we become people who incarnate the gospel and speak of it freely because our hearts and minds have been captivated by it. Becoming people of wisdom and compassion is the prerequisite for any evangelistic technique.

This chapter is about wisdom, with the book of Proverbs as the primary text. Later chapters address issues of compassion, listening, and anger (also important themes in the book of Proverbs). As we study these pithy statements by Solomon and others, we grow in wisdom. We develop lenses through which to see the world. We construct grids through which to interpret reality. And we sound more like a rabbi than a used car salesman.

To be sure, Proverbs teaches us how to handle specific situations. But as physical exercise makes our bodies more adept at burning calories, immersing ourselves in Proverbs makes us become more adept at applying wisdom to a wide variety of situations, not just the specific ones that Solomon addressed.

What proverb or Scripture could you apply, for example, to the following conversation with a disturbed young man named Adam? After hearing me speak to a church group about "rabbinic evangelism," he approached me with a serious look on his face. He seemed not to be happy—with me or anyone else in the world.

"On what do you base your reality?" he asked, without introduction or greeting.

"I'm sorry. Could you repeat the question?" I was stalling. Having just finished speaking, I was tired—both physically and mentally—and I was trying to muster some strength for what looked like a tough conversation.

"On what do you base your reality?" he repeated.

I reached out my hand and introduced myself and asked his name. I told him that knowing his name would be helpful for me before we delved into such deep waters.

After exchanging names, I said, "I'm not sure I'm the one who 'bases' reality on anything. That would be God's job. Do you mean, on what do I base my understanding of reality?" I was praying for wisdom and compassion as I spoke to this guy: wisdom because his question was complex and I sensed emotional issues behind the intellectual question; compassion because I didn't want to talk to anyone just then, let alone some depressed, difficult, intellectual interrogator.

"Okay. You could word the question that way."

"I guess my perception of reality is based on truth, as God has revealed it. At least, that's my goal—to try to be as close to the truth as possible. Why? On what do you base *your* reality?"

What followed was one of the most difficult conversations I've ever had with anyone. Adam was a man in pain. An intellectually rigorous dialogue about metaphysics was not his real agenda. He told me that no one had ever loved him. His family had alienated themselves from him, and no woman had ever grown close enough to him to consider marriage. He freely shared these things even though we'd just met. When I talked about Jesus' suffering for our sins, he told me that he's suffered far more than Jesus ever did.

Although I could have provided answers, answers weren't what

Adam needed. Although many of the things that Adam said were foolish, he was not the kind of fool described in the book of Proverbs. I couldn't point to any one verse of Scripture that described Adam's situation or prescribed a remedy for him. But the wisdom I've gathered from Scripture and the compassion that has come from meditating on God's grace helped me connect with this troubled man. We still dialogue, and he seems to be getting closer to light and further from darkness.

Four Lessons From Solomon

As we seek to build wisdom within our souls, Solomon *can* teach us four specific lessons about specific situations.

1. Avoid an Argument

I easily could have had an argument with Adam. Solomon, though, warned us, "Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out" (Prov. 17:14). Or "He who loves a quarrel loves sin; he who builds a high gate invites destruction" (17:19). Solomon even tells us why such avoidance is prudent: "An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel" (18:19).

Many an evangelizing Christian has won the battle but lost the war by not avoiding an ugly argument. In Acts 17, Paul gives us insight about healthy arguing, while Proverbs teaches us about the destructive kind of arguing. We must discern the difference. A believer might prove to a coworker that Jesus really did rise from the dead, that the Bible really has archeological evidence to support it, or that the Christian church really has been a force for good in the world. But along the way, that evangelizer might alienate that colleague to such an extent that he or she might never want to hear about God again. Our Christian had the content right but failed to exercise wisdom.

Remember the old saying: "The man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."

2. Recognize a Fool

This second lesson shows us that some dialogues should stop, and others should never start. Recognizing these situations before it's too late is crucial.

Solomon told us, "Stay away from a foolish man, for you will not find knowledge on his lips" (Prov. 14:7), and he advises us not to "speak to a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom of your words" (23:9). As he often does, Solomon tells us why we need to avoid wasting our breath: "A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions" (18:2). (Note: The vital lessons about answering a fool—Proverbs 26:4–5—are addressed at length in chapter 6.)

A young woman named Shelly met a fool for lunch. That was not her intention. In fact, the "fool" in this case was her father, Bill. She had hoped for a pleasant father-daughter conversation about her new job, his new house in the retirement community, and light things such as the weather.

But, as was his custom, Bill took the opportunity to attack Shelly's Christian faith. He'd been doing a lot of reading, he told her, and had even put some of his thoughts into writing. He couldn't believe how "stupid" the Christian preachers on television are and how "biased" the best-selling Christian authors are. Out came a file folder of his written diatribes against the spokesmen of the faith. The folder was thick, evidence of many hours of work and a lot of energy expended.

"Dad, this seems like a really big deal to you. You must spend hours reading and writing this stuff," Shelly said, trying not to sound exasperated. "Why do you do this?"

"Here, look at this article," he blurted, ignoring her question. "Listen to what this preacher says about Noah's ark." He was unstoppable. After a long quote of a rather anti-intellectual sounding article, Bill asked his daughter, "Is that the stupidest argument you've ever heard?"

"Dad, that's not fair. You only choose stupid people to refute. You should answer the best spokesmen of the Christian faith, not the easiest ones to knock down."

"Like this guy?" he countered. He quickly pulled another sheet from

his file. He quoted another, less extreme Christian writer and started to attack his logic.

Shelly interrupted, "Is this really how you want to spend our lunch time?"

Again, no response to her question. Shelly wasn't surprised. This had been going on for years. There'd been a time when she actually tried to answer his arguments, but she now sees that he was never interested in true dialogue.

That day's lunch sounded like so many others. He never responded to her questions. He simply brought out another article, book, story, or letter to the editor that supported his agnosticism.

She asked if he'd ever read that book she sent him for his birthday, C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*.[1]

He almost made eye contact with her.

"Yeah. I read it."

"What did you think?"

"It was okay. I don't remember too much about it."

She doubted his honesty but couldn't figure out how to accuse him of lying. Lewis's arguments deserved better attention than Bill gave to them. Lewis, an Oxford professor, embodied a more formidable foe for him. Bill's lack of interaction with Lewis convinced Shelly that her dad was less interested in the truth and more interested in "airing his own opinions."

"Dad, let's continue this conversation when we have Lewis's book in front of us and we can discuss his arguments."

"But what about this book that I found at the library?"

Shelly called for the waiter and asked for their check.

In our zeal (or is it desperation?) for evangelistic conversations, we sometimes think that any conversation about God is a good conversation. If we're with a fool, however, we would be better off, as Shelly did, to walk away.

Consider what Jesus told us about some conversation partners: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs" (Matt. 7:6). Our message is too precious to be treated with ridicule and derision. When we simply let fools wallow in their foolishness, we run the risk that they'll "trample them [the sacred pearls, that is, the gospel message] under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces."

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

Shelly was right for calling a halt to her father's foolish onslaught.

Faced with a similar situation, we should try to bring the true nature of someone's "arguments" to the surface, by posing questions:

"Why are you bringing up these things?"

"Are you asking these questions because you really want an answer?"

"If I give you an answer to this question, would you be convinced that Christianity is true?"

"What's the biggest issue that prevents you from being a Christian?"

"Are you willing to read something that I think answers your question?"

Until someone is more interested in truth than in airing his or her own opinions, it's best to talk about the weather.

3. Remember That People Are People

Proverbs presents a multifaceted picture of people. We're not just rational beings to be informed and educated, spiritual beings to be evangelized and enlightened, or physical beings to be fed and satiated. We are whole beings, called to love God with the whole heart, soul, strength, and mind.

This lesson hit home at two o'clock on a Saturday afternoon as I spoke at a weekend retreat. The way the students took notes during the third evangelism training session surprised me. The first session, on Friday night, was about how to make a clear presentation of the gospel. I suggested ways to begin a conversation and demonstrated how to present the gospel in a succinct way. The students yawned all the way through it.

"Tell us something we haven't heard a million times," was expressed on their bored faces.

Saturday morning's session received a similar response. I spoke about clarifying misconceptions about the gospel, offering

illustrations that had worked many times for me. They'd heard them all before.

So I dreaded Saturday afternoon's session. Even if it weren't the worst time of day to speak, I wondered if I had anything new to teach them.

I asked them how many had read Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People.*[2] They laughed.

"Isn't that a secular book that salesmen use to help them make more money?" one of them asked.

"Well, some people use the book that way," I answered, "but Carnegie has a lot of wisdom that we can apply to a more eternally significant task than just making sales."

They didn't seem convinced, so I told them about David. I'd met David during the first week of that school year. He was a freshman, and seemed lost on the big urban campus. He attended one of our meetings (because a friend invited him), and I had the opportunity to share the gospel with him. He wasn't interested in the gospel. My message made sense, he said, but seemed irrelevant to his life. What difference did some guy's martyrdom thousands of years ago make in his life today?

I tried my best to answer his question, but nothing seemed to connect. He showed a bit of a response when I told him what difference the gospel made in my life. Unlike many other "testimonies" that I'd shared before, I didn't dwell on the "content" of the gospel—what my life was like before I became a Christian, what convinced me to become a Christian, or how I can be sure I'm going to heaven. Instead, I shared what I now call my "so-what testimony." I talked about my experience of being a Christian—of how I now sense a purpose and meaning to life, of how I never feel alone, and how—because I feel accepted by God—I more willingly accept other people. I told how being a Christian makes my marriage better, gives me a clear conscience, and fills me with a sense of optimism and hope.

2. Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936).

Then I changed the subject and asked how he was adjusting to his new environment. I was genuinely concerned. I listened. Through his rambling answer, he indicated that he hadn't made many friends, that he liked classical music, and that he hated the cafeteria food.

I told him that I, too, liked classical music, that, in fact, I was a music major in my undergraduate days. We talked about Beethoven, Debussy, and Dvorak. I told him that students were entitled to free tickets for on-campus concerts. Then I invited him to play volleyball with us the next night. He could meet some people, eat some watermelon, and have some fun—and we wouldn't be doing any preaching.

He came to the volleyball night and then, shortly thereafter, started attending a Bible study one of the students led in his dorm. David was moving closer to the point of decision each day.

What does David's story have to do with *How to Win Friends and Influence People*? The things I learned from Dale Carnegie did more to move David closer to the Cross than anything I'd learned from evangelism seminars.

Now the students at the Saturday afternoon seminar were ready to listen. They knew David! They knew he was going to Bible studies, but they didn't know how he got there. They took out their notebooks and pens.

I listed Dale Carnegie's nine guidelines for relating better to people. These guidelines pave the way for sharing the gospel more fruitfully. I didn't use much illustration because the guidelines are self-explanatory:

1. Don't criticize, condemn, or complain.
2. Give honest, sincere appreciation.
3. Arouse in the other person an eager want. (That's what a "so-what testimony" can do.)
4. Become genuinely interested in other people.
5. Smile.
6. Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language.
7. Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves.

8. Talk in terms of the other person's interests.
9. Make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely.[3]

The students wrote as fast as I could speak. Each of them had attended numerous seminars on evangelism, but they all remarked that they'd never before heard these concepts. They now seemed more eager than ever to share their faith when they returned to campus.

Then I opened my Bible. I told them that Carnegie wasn't as original as they might have thought. Long before Carnegie wrote *How to Win Friends and Influence People,* Solomon observed, "When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him" (Prov. 16:7). Solomon went even further; beyond mere business sense, he gave instruction for conveying grace to others. In words that the New Testament repeats, he told us, "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you" (25:21–22).

Solomon understood the complex nature of people. He realized that conveying content makes up only a small part of the communication process. Being sensitive to a person's heart comprises a much larger portion. Thus, Solomon tells us, "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out" (20:5). And "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy" (14:10). Solomon recognized the mundane realities of life: "If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse" (27:14). And long before holistic medicine became popular, the Holy Scriptures connected our spiritual nature with our physical body: "A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones" (14:30).

4. Remember the Power of the Tongue

The fourth lesson in Solomonic soul-winning warns us of the power of words. On the positive side, the "mouth of the righteous" and the

3. Ibid., 80, 142.

"speech of the upright" can bring forth wisdom (Prov. 10:31), rescue the wicked (12:6), bring healing (12:18; 16:24; 15:4), commend knowledge (15:2), promote instruction (16:21, 23), and have the power of life and death (18:21). No wonder that "he who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for his friend" (22:11). On the negative side, "a lying tongue hates those it hurts" (26:28), is like a scorching fire (16:27), gushes folly (15:2), pierces like a sword (12:18), and lies in wait for blood (12:6).

Heeding these warnings will lead us to "use words with restraint" (17:27) and to guard our mouths and keep ourselves from calamity (21:23). It will lead us not to speak in haste, for "there is more hope for a fool" than for one who speaks before thinking (29:20). It will chasten us to choose words that are respectful and avoid words that hurt.

This doesn't mean that total silence is always golden. One campus minister set up "The Listening Post" on a campus, and students could come to the post and talk. He placed a literal wooden post on a table in the middle of a heavily trafficked part of the campus. The minister sat on a chair on one side of the table, facing an empty chair on the other side of the table. A large sign urged students to sit down and talk, guaranteeing, "I'll just listen in silence." He did just that. I watched. I also noticed that many students left, wearing disappointed frowns.

One student blurted in disgust, "What the *@#&*!!'s* the point of that!" Instinctively, the students knew more than the minister. They hungered for "an honest answer [that] is like a kiss on the lips" (24:26). They knew that "a man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!" (15:23). After years of counseling some of these students, I've seen the wisdom that "he who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue" (28:23). Just sitting in silence and nodding your head might convey a tacit affirmation that serves the same function as flattery. But somewhere between total silence and nonstop talk lies wisdom.

He Who Wins Souls Is Wise

By combining two seemingly unrelated aspects of a godly life—internal righteousness and external outreach—Proverbs 11:30 says something very significant. The verse begins, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life." If we reflect upon that image—that of not just bearing fruit, but also being the tree that produces the fruit—we each grow in our desire to be a righteous person, of being a tree of life. The fruit of that tree might be a positive outlook, or that we resist temptation to sin because holiness has a hold on our inner lives, or that we gravitate toward honesty and justice because our hearts have been touched by those qualities. As a tree of life, we bear fruit the way a pear tree bears its fruit.

The second half of the proverb, however, goes in an unexpected direction: ". . . and he who wins souls is wise." A connection is made between our own internal righteousness and our influence upon others. To "win souls" in the Old Testament doesn't refer to a Billy Graham-type sermon in a stadium or an open Bible presentation of the gospel in a prison cell. Rather, it refers to influencing someone's heart and mind.

Absalom's "[stealing] the hearts of the men of Israel" (2 Sam. 15:6) is a negative example of winning souls for a sinful cause. Solomon would have us win hearts for a righteous end. We'd be wise to influence someone's "soul" and make that person righteous—in right standing before God and right in his daily dealings with others.

I tried to do this with the men of Lamba Chi Alpha. As a young campus minister, I was invited to speak to their newly formed chapter at Maryland's Towson State University. My topic, "The Real Meaning of Christmas," was selected by their education committee, which consisted of several Christian guys I knew.

These young zealots wanted me to come and preach the gospel to their heathen fraternity brothers. So I did what they asked and almost got run out of town. I could tell that this presentation wasn't coming across as good news. They were polite, but their body language spoke loudly and clearly. As you might guess, we didn't have anyone "walk the aisle" that night.

It was almost a miracle that the Christians on the education committee convinced their officers to invite me back. They asked me to make another presentation—"The Real Meaning of Easter." Different time of year, same temperature of fire and brimstone—same number of converts.

I wondered if there might be another way to present the gospel to a fraternity. I prayed that Lamba Chi Alpha would be struck with collective amnesia, and if they ever invited me back, I'd try a different approach.

The education committee asked me to come one more time but said, "Try to do something less religious." I suggested the topic of "Chapter Unity," a talk that might help them bring their fifty-plus members into closer relationships. They were willing to give it a try and told me to keep it to less than twenty minutes.

When I got up to speak, I could tell that I needed to dig myself out of a hole. I began by thanking them for inviting me and complimenting them for their open mindedness. To relieve some of the tension, I cracked a few jokes about some things that had happened on campus that week.

I told them my topic for the night was "Chapter Unity," and I talked about the need for unity and harmony in our society. I shared the experience of my neighborhood watch committee and the unity in our common desire for safety for our families. I think they were pleasantly surprised that I was involved in something that wasn't religious, and they seemed more open to listen.

The first suggestion to aid unity was a common goal. I didn't offer what I thought it should be, but I asked, "What is your purpose for having a fraternity?" They should all agree on what their purpose is, and they should be able to state it concisely and clearly. They were with me.

The second aid was clear communication. They should have some skills for ensuring that they understood one another. I shared some

funny quotations from insurance claim forms that displayed bad communication, and the laughter helped my cause.

The third ingredient was forgiveness. They wouldn't need this if everyone in their fraternity was perfect, but . . .

They got my point without my having to finish the sentence. I shared how forgiveness made my marriage work, and how important forgiveness is for two people who want an intimate relationship. Without forgiveness, there is no intimacy. I could tell that they were interested.

"There's a lot more I can say about forgiveness," I said, "but I want to stay within my time limit. Let me just say that, as a Christian, I think there's a correlation between a person's forgiveness by God and the ability that person will have in expressing forgiveness to others."

My last suggestion for chapter unity was the need for encouragement. Positive, uplifting words are healing and unifying whereas sarcasm and insult are divisive and painful. I could tell that I'd touched a nerve. I wasn't surprised. What college guys don't cut each other down with sarcasm and insult!

I concluded my talk, saying that I'd appreciate their feedback about my presentation since this was a bit different than the other talks I'd given. They smiled, remembering that the real meaning of Christmas and the real meaning of Easter hadn't been such big hits with them. They applauded and several of them wanted to ask questions. When I told them that I was available for discussion, some of them actually wrote down my phone number.

I had many good conversations with several guys as a result of that presentation. Most significantly, several new guys started showing up at the chapter's Bible study hosted by the Christian guys on the education committee. A few of them came to faith in Christ, and several others who'd strayed from Christ rededicated their lives to the Lord.

I can give Solomon some credit that my third talk to Lamba Chi Alpha was better received. "Chapter Unity" displayed more wisdom and compassion, showed more awareness that people are people, and won more souls than other approaches I'd tried. The previous two talks reinforced the group's suspicion that religion had nothing new

to say to them. Popular culture, though, has always been suspicious of Christianity. And in the days to come, that will be even more pronounced. We'll need, then, to remember, "If you want to gather honey, don't kick over the beehive."[4] As a result, we'll "make even [our] enemies live at peace with [us]" (Prov. 16:7).

4. Ibid., 31

CHAPTER 3

How Do Questions Pave the Way for Answers?

NOT MANY PEOPLE HAVE HEARD OF THE "Plug Theory." Even fewer people believe it. Nevertheless, my son, Dan, proclaims it with boldness. He sounds convinced that it holds the keys to understanding international politics, world history, and military strategy.

The Plug Theory contends that every country has a plug, located somewhere near its geographic center, that prevents the country from sinking. Obviously, it's in a nation's best interest to prevent anyone from pulling its plug. Thus, keeping its plug location a secret remains a top priority for a nation's military, security, intelligence, and political forces. Pull the plug, and any other concern becomes meaningless.

Dan guesses that the plug of America sits somewhere in Kansas. His theory has some intriguing implications: Atlantis didn't protect its plug very well; Holland had its plug pulled but rescued its land from submersion by reinserting the plug and building a series of dikes; Vatican City is itself a plug; Lesotho is the plug for South Africa.

Dan waxes eloquently about the Plug Theory at family gatherings. The response is always the same—laughter and entertainment. No one ever believes him, tells him that he's right, or thanks him for enlightening them. Dan's listeners never write to their congressmen or women, urging the protection of our plug, thereby keeping the world safe for democracy.

Dan's theory amuses but never persuades. For anyone to believe his

notion, Dan would need to demonstrate support from, and correlation to, other things that people already accept. If anyone had ever seen one of these plugs, for example, that would help. Or if anyone who serves in our government ever gave credence to the idea, that would make people listen more seriously.

Supporting facts and ideas build "plausibility structures," making belief in something more probable. Without plausibility structures, an idea is unlikely to get even a hearing, let alone adherents.

For many people, believing in Jesus is as likely as believing in the Plug Theory. In their minds, neither idea has much plausibility. The propositions that there is a God, that He is personal and knowable, that He hates sin, that He sent His Son to earth, that His Son's death gives us freedom from guilt and gets us into heaven after we die—all sound as reasonable as the idea that a big plug in the middle of Kansas keeps our country afloat.

This doubt arises, in part, because the gospel used to have more plausibility structures supporting it than it does today. People believed that such a thing as truth existed, and that we could find out what it was. People believed in words, that they had meaning, and that the intention of a message was determined by its author, not by a reader. People accepted the law of noncontradiction and were bothered when someone espoused two ideas that contradicted each other. People believed in a correlation between life and beliefs, and quickly pointed out hypocrisy when they saw it. People believed the gospel because, given the many other things that they believed, it was believable.

Today, many of those plausibility structures have been dismantled.

Almost one hundred years ago, J. Gresham Machen declared prophetically,

> False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force

> of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.[1]

The church's calling, then—in addition to proclaiming the gospel, feeding the poor, building up families, and encouraging the downtrodden—must also include intentional efforts to build plausibility structures.

Consider the apostle Paul's outline of his ministry agenda in 2 Corinthians 10:3–5. After defending himself against his critics, who wondered why he did things the way he did, he states, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

We can imagine some of the "weapons of this world" that Paul had in mind—jargon, rhetoric, flashy images, emotional manipulation, and sales techniques—things that have as much appeal as those annoying pop-up ads on the Internet. Weapons he *would* endorse include praying for people, quoting Scripture, handing out tracts, and proclaiming boldly the Good News.

But certain weapons—the ones that are able to "demolish strongholds," "demolish arguments," and "take every thought captive"—differ from those in the more common arsenal. Such weapons include dialogue, discussion, challenging questions, well-crafted explanations about life's difficulties, and thought-provoking articles about various topics addressed from a Christian perspective. These weapons topple the weak scaffolds upon which people are standing so they see their need for something more solid. They take thoughts prisoner and make them submissive to a new master—the logic of scriptural truth. They tear apart ideas in which people have trusted (that is, their "strongholds") so that they see the tenuousness of their situation.

1. Address delivered on 20 September 1912 at the opening of the 101st session of Princeton Theological Seminary. Reprinted in J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 162.

To employ these weapons, we must understand five principles and employ five operative questions. But demolishing strongholds is not easy. We pave the way for belief with questions that build plausibility structure, but we must be on our toes and ready for a struggle. The tone of Paul's words—*wage war, weapons, fight, demolish, pretension, make obedient, take captive*—indicate that the struggle isn't going to be a picnic.

Principle Number One: Reveille Precedes Revelation

Put more simply, we must awaken people. In many cases, people have been lulled into believing the illogical, and rousing them from sleep must happen before we present any gospel content.

When people say things that, given some thought, would prove to be nonsense, we must help them see the fallacy of their statements.

- "I think all religions are the same."
- "I think all people are basically good."
- "I would never tell anyone their religion is wrong."

People who say such things are in desperate need of an alarm clock.

To paraphrase the title of Neil Postman's 1985 book, we are "amusing ourselves to death."[2] (If *muse* means to consider or meditate at length, *amuse*, its opposite, means to be so entertained as not to think or consider at all.)

C. S. Lewis referred to the role of amusement in *The Screwtape Letters.* In the very first imaginary letter from the senior demon to a new trainee, Screwtape instructs Wormwood about tripping up his "patient" and ruining his faith:

> It sounds as if you supposed that argument was the way to keep him out of the Enemy's [i.e., God's] clutches. That might

2. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Press, 1986).

> have been so if he had lived a few centuries earlier. At that time the humans still knew pretty well when a thing was proved and when it was not; and if it was proved they really believed it. They still connected thinking with doing and were prepared to alter their way of life as the result of a chain of reasoning. But what with the weekly press and other such weapons, we have largely altered that. Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to having a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn't think of doctrines as primarily "true" or "false," but as "academic" or "practical," "outworn" or "contemporary," "conventional" or "ruthless." *Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church.* . . . The trouble about argument is that it moves the whole struggle onto the Enemy's own ground.[3]

A good way to "move the whole struggle onto the Enemy's ground" is to start with a one-word question—"Really?" This can help sound reveille before revelation begins.

When people say, for instance, "I think all religions are the same," we could respond with "Really?" Then, after people begin to awaken, we can elaborate by asking, "Do you really think your religion is the same as all others? How about that religion that led people to kill themselves when they saw the Hale-Bop comet? They thought that it was going to take them to heaven. Do you *really* think that *their* religion is the same as yours?" The ensuing discussion could explore which religions are ridiculous and which religions are credible.

When people say, "I think all people are basically good," we could respond with, "Really? Does that include Osama Bin Laden? Or the boys who killed their classmates at Columbine High School?" If they are willing to concede that they didn't mean *all*, it's worth exploring where the lines are drawn between good, not so good, pretty bad, and downright evil.

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1942, 2001), 1 (emphasis added).

This process might hurt. Waking up, whether physically or intellectually, is seldom pleasant. It would help if we say the word *really* with as little sarcasm in our voice as possible.

Principle Number Two: Some Things Can't Be True

If I were to write the sentence, "I cannot write a single word in English," you'd know that something was odd. That statement, written in English, can't be true; it's self-refuting. One day, my son gave me a piece of paper on which was written, "The statement on the other side of this paper is true." I, of course, turned it over, only to find this sentence: "The statement on the other side of this paper is false." Over and over I turned it, much to my son's delight, only to see that this conundrum was unsolvable. The combination of statements could not work.

Many things people say about religion are self-refuting. "All religions are true" is a common example. Despite the frequency of this pronouncement—or its many variations—all religions *can't* be true. If one religion claims to be the only correct path to God (as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and most other religions do), then a religion that contradicts it cannot be true.

People resist such logic, but without it, all dialogue is nonsense. Such resistance is why people picked up stones to throw at Jesus instead of inviting Him to their next interfaith dialogue. His claims of exclusivity have always negated other points of view, and that has never been popular.

To overcome resistance, we must soften hearts before anyone will listen to "No one comes to the Father but by Jesus." We can soften hearts by asking the question, "Can you explain that [your statement] to me?"

Asking this question demonstrates an unwillingness to be put on the defensive. In fact, it has a certain amount of offense to its posture. Far too often, Christians assume a defensive posture and allow themselves to be backed into a corner. But our message is coherent, plausible, and beneficial. Other people should defend their messages. In so

doing, the foolishness or impossibility of their religion will be demonstrated. We can take an offensive posture without being rude or mean spirited or insulting. (See chapter 11 for more about this topic.)

A conversation along these lines might sound like this:

NON-CHRISTIAN: I don't think anyone has the right to say that their religion is right and someone else's is wrong. I think that all religions are right.

CHRISTIAN: I'm not sure I understand. Can you explain that to me?

NON-CHRISTIAN: What do you mean?

CHRISTIAN: Well, I used to believe that myself—that all religions were right and that no one's faith was better than anyone else's.

NON-CHRISTIAN: So what happened to you?

CHRISTIAN: Someone challenged me to think about it a little. I started finding out what different religions believed. I found that religions that disagree on such basic things can't all be right.

NON-CHRISTIAN: They don't disagree about *basic* things. They just disagree about unimportant things like what kinds of clothes to wear or whether to worship on Sunday or Saturday or some other day.

CHRISTIAN: I disagree! Different religions differ on *major* things.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Like what?

CHRISTIAN: Like what God is like or if there even is a god. Or what we humans are like, what the whole meaning of life is, whether we're supposed to try to connect with God (or whatever) through action or by withdrawing. And then there's the whole thing about the afterlife. Do we go to heaven, or do we just die and that's it? And what difference does any of this make? You'd be amazed at how different the answers are to those questions.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Whoa. Slow down. Those things are all so theoretical. When it comes to things that are down to earth, like loving your neighbor, all religions agree about that, don't they?

CHRISTIAN: Not really. For example, should we care for people dying in the streets, the way Mother Teresa did, or should we let them die so we don't mess up their karma, the way her Hindu critics did? Or how about this: Judaism says that God chose the Jewish people, the descendents of Isaac, to get the land of Israel. Muslims believe that Allah chose them because they're the descendents of Ishmael, and *they* should get the land (and they call it Palestine!). There's a lot of rocks being thrown at each other because of this disagreement, and they can't *both* be right.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Well, they should just split the land.

CHRISTIAN: That's a great idea! But that's not what either side is saying. If they were to split the land, they'd *both* have to change their beliefs.

NON-CHRISTIAN: What's so bad about that? Isn't compromise a good thing?

CHRISTIAN: Of course it is. But that would mean that they'd have to say "Hey, we're wrong" and they'd have to say that you, someone who's neither a Jew nor a Muslim, are right.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Now you're mixing religion and politics. You can't do that.

CHRISTIAN: Do you mean that it would be *wrong* to mix religion and politics?

NON-CHRISTIAN: Yes!

CHRISTIAN: So you'd tell someone who mixed religion and politics that they're wrong?

NON-CHRISTIAN: Of course I would.

CHRISTIAN: So you, with your religious perspective—that religion shouldn't be mixed with politics—would tell someone else that their religious perspective—that mixes religion and politics—is wrong?

NON-CHRISTIAN: Hmm. Well, I think no one should *ever* discuss religion or politics. Can we change the subject?

Asking the question, "Can you explain that to me?" helps build the plausibility structure that some things can't be true. People can then search for criteria to determine which things can be true.

Principle Number Three: Some Things Can Be Partially True

Quite often, a non-Christian will tell us that other religions contain truth just as Christianity does and that Christians should not claim any kind of superiority. Jesus was just another guru like Muhammad, Buddha, or Deepak Chopra. How should we respond? Far too often, we try to show all of the flaws in other religions.

We don't need to do that. Nothing is wrong with admitting that other religions get some things right. Again, C. S. Lewis had valuable insight. In *Mere Christianity,* he wrote,

> If you are a Christian you don't have to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all through. If you are an atheist you do have to believe that the main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all those religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view. But, of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right and they are wrong. As in arithmetic there's only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong: but some of the wrong answers are much nearer being right than others.[4]

When conceding that another religion contains truth, we can add the single-word question, *So?*

Someone may tell us, for example, that Buddhists are right about the reality of a spiritual realm and that we should be more aware of the unseen universe. We can say, "I agree," and then add lovingly, not sarcastically, "So?"

Surprised that you didn't attack Buddhism defensively, they might or might not see your point. You can clarify by elaborating, "So? Buddhism's right that there's a spiritual realm. There's still a whole lot more to finding a faith. We need one that meets all of our needs—both in this life and in the afterlife. I think that Buddhism gets some of that right. In fact, we'd almost expect every religion to get some things right. The question is to find the one that gets it *all* right. I have a lot of unanswered questions about Buddhism. Have you studied it very much?"

From there, the conversation can progress past the level of cliché and dig into more satisfying substance.

4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 35.

Asking the question "So?" helps build the plausibility structure that some things can be partially true without being fully true. As in a court of law, when it comes to finding a faith that meets all of our needs, we must find "the truth, the *whole* truth, and nothing but the truth."

Principle Number Four: Some Things Might Be True

I learned this principle from a guy named Bobby. As we sat in the dormitory cafeteria eating lunch, I sensed that his question was sincere.

"Why should we believe what the Bible says about Jesus, or Moses, or anyone else? It's probably been changed so many times over the years. It's just like the game of telephone."

I was well acquainted with the telephone-game analogy. One person decides what message he or she wants to send through several people who are sitting in a line. The first person whispers the message into the ear of the person who's sitting in the next chair. Without repeating it or answering any clarifying questions, the second person passes the message along to the third person, and so on down the line.

The message invariably gets distorted along the way. What begins as "Mary had a little lamb" becomes "Mary had a little ram" and then "Mary had a little Spam," all the way down the line until it's "Harry had a Yiddish ham."

"That's just the way it must be with the Bible, right?" The volume of Bobby's voice was attracting attention. "Who knows how the story of the feeding of the five thousand really happened?"

"Well, that could be one way to explain how we got the Bible," I offered.

He waited for more preaching on my part, perhaps a sermonette about God's holy, infallible word, a diatribe that he'd heard before. But I just waited for him to consider some alternatives.

"How else could it have happened?" he wondered.

I felt the force of his doubt. Perhaps there was a time when Bobby truly expected answers to his questions. When he first started making his telephone analogy about the Bible, he might have hoped that someone would offer a satisfying response to his challenge. But the more

people kept missing his target, the more hardened he became in his unbelief. There was in his voice almost a sense of "I dare you to prove my telephone theory wrong."

So I opted for a partial victory rather than the total one.

"Isn't it possible that the God who first inspired the Bible also preserved it?"

Silence.

"Do you see what I'm asking?"

"Not really."

"Let's just say that there is a god and that he wants to communicate with us. That's possible, theoretically, isn't it?"

"Theoretically."

"And let's just say that he's chosen to do so by inspiring people to write stuff down. The written word does have some advantages over the oral tradition, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"So, God inspires people to record certain events that occurred in Jesus' life, or certain messages that Moses preached, or things like that."

"Go on."

"Then, this same God who inspires the words, and makes sure they get written down the way He wants them to, *also* makes sure they stay that way. Isn't that possible?"

"Yes. It's possible."

"That's what I believe happened. The telephone analogy is possible but, as I've looked at discoveries, archeology, and other things, I think the telephone thing is a less likely explanation of how we got the Bible than the way I've sketched out."

Bobby had more questions. But at least this one had finally been responded to in a way that softened him a little.

"Isn't it possible?" may be one of the most important ways to begin a question. It helps people consider that something *might* be true so that they ultimately can accept that it *is* true. Some of the applications of this phrase might sound like this:

- "Isn't it possible that Jesus did rise from the dead?"

- "Isn't it possible that God did part the Red Sea?"
- "Isn't it possible that the kind of God who parts a Red Sea could also make a virgin have a baby?"
- "If God can suspend the laws of nature in one place, isn't it possible that He could do so anywhere?"
- "Isn't it possible that there really is only one right way to get to God and that all the other ways are 'close but no cigar'?"
- "Isn't it possible that Jesus really is the one who fulfills all of those Old Testament prophecies? That He really is the Messiah?"
- "Isn't it possible that there is a god who exists somewhere but he's beyond your level of knowledge at this point? You wouldn't say that you've got all knowledge, right? Isn't it possible that you could find out something tomorrow that would make a belief in God at least worth considering?"

One caution, however, when dialoging with the principle of "Some Things Might Be True." Rather than leading people to partial acceptance, the dialogue sometimes exposes their level of irrational disbelief. They might be so committed to their position that no amount of evidence or reasoning can sway them.

Such people may be committed to preconceived *un*belief, or blind doubt. They insist that something *isn't* true simply because they've decided it *can't* be true.

Consider the man who thought that he was dead. He was convinced that he'd already died. He declined invitations to dinner, to play golf, or to go anywhere because, he said, "I'm dead."

His friends tried to show him the error of his ways. They brought months' worth of obituary pages to him, none containing his name. He insisted that the editors had missed his passing. His friends did everything they could think of to show him that he was alive, but no amount of evidence could counter his primary assumption.

One friend finally thought of a possibility. "Do dead men bleed?" he asked.

"No," responded the "dead" man.

So he grabbed a pin and pricked the "dead" man's finger. Sure enough, blood came out, and his friends thought that they had now shown to him irrefutable proof that he was alive.

His response exposed his intractability. "I can't believe it!" he shouted. "Dead men *do* bleed!"

Dallas Willard offers this advice for our interaction with such a person: "Often a good starting point when trying to help those who do not believe in God or accept Christ as Lord is to get them to deal honestly with the question: Would I *like* there to be a God? Or, would I *like* it if Jesus turned out to be Lord? This may help them realize the extent to which what they *want* to be the case is controlling their ability to see what is the case."[5]

Not all unbelief, then, is intellectual at its core; therefore, reason alone will fail to sway such unbelief. We would do well to remember Jesus' evaluation: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). In his book *Ends and Means,* Aldous Huxley illustrates his own flawed motive for his beliefs:

> I had motive for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently I assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics, he is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do, or why his friends should not seize political power and govern in the way that they find most advantageous to themselves. . . . For myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation, sexual and political.[6]

5. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 111.
6. Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means: An Inquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for Their Realization* (Westport: Greenwood, 1970), 270.

Asking a question that begins with "Would you like it if . . . ?" helps expose a flawed plausibility structure—one that says, we sometimes believe things because we want to, not because they're true.

Principle Number Five: Somebody Sees the Whole Elephant, or We *Can* Know the Truth

Some arguments gain authority simply by repetition. The more they're offered as support, the more accepted the arguments become—regardless of how reasonable or unreasonable they might be. The story of the blind men and the elephant is a case in point. It's a favorite in boardrooms and classrooms. Depending on which Web site you consult, the story is either Hindu or Buddhist in origin and started in India, Pakistan, or somewhere in Africa. It goes like this.

A group of blind men wanted to know what an elephant looked like. They found one, and each man zeroed in on a different part of the elephant's body. The one who found its side concluded that an elephant is like a wall. The one who felt its tusk declared that an elephant is like a spear. In turn, each one offered a different description. Holding the tail led to comparison with a snake, the knee with a tree, the ear with a fan, and so forth. But none of them had access to the entire animal, so none could say legitimately what the whole elephant looked like.

By application, the blind men are likened to followers of different religions. The moral is that no religion can claim to have the whole truth. Something about this call for humility is very appealing. At a university colloquium on conflict resolution, a professor implored emotionally for "people of all faiths" to stop claiming they have all the answers, and just listen to one another. "If we combine all our insights, together we'll arrive at the truth," he assured us.

The professor's sentiment suggests that no one religion has claim of Truth, and that sentiment is expressed well in the last two stanzas of John Godfrey Saxe's poem *The Blind Men and the Elephant:*

And so these men of Indostan,
  Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
  Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
  And all were in the wrong!

So oft in theologic wars,
  The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
  Of what each other mean,
And prate about an elephant
  Not one of them has seen![7]

Although people love this parable and its message of humility, its problem is its own arrogance! The blind men are condemned for claiming to perceive the whole elephant. But the only way the teller of the parable could say that the blind men are wrong is if the *teller* sees the whole elephant—the very thing that he or she says no one can do.

In the process of condemning religious people for being arrogant, the nonreligious person turns out to be the most arrogant of all. Whether uttered by an impassioned professor or a clever poet, the self-contradiction becomes plain to see. Do you hear the tone of Saxe's strong words *utter ignorance* and his conclusion that "*all* were in the wrong"? Even choosing "blind men" to be the representatives of religion has a certain condescension to it, does it not?

So when a well-meaning friend tells us the parable of the blind men and the elephant or declares that no religion has the whole picture, we should ask him or her the fifth question: "How do you know that?"

This might be the most important question we can ask because it

7. John Godfrey Saxe, "The Blind Men and the Elephant," in *The Best Loved Poems of the American People,* selected by Hazel Felleman (New York: Doubleday, 1936), 521–22.

gets below the surface. It digs into the underlying issue of how we know what we know. Philosophers call this aspect of truth "epistemology." They would tell us that questions of epistemology must precede questions of content. In other words, determining *how* we know something must come before deciding *what* we know.

Although dialogues of epistemology are important, they are often frustrating. Asking people "How do you know that?" might get a blank stare or a dirty look in response. Few people have ever thought on this level. After a doubter tells the blind-men-and-the-elephant story, a conversation might sound like this:

NON-CHRISTIAN: You see, different religions are just like all of those blind men. None of them has the whole truth.

CHRISTIAN: How do you know that?

NON-CHRISTIAN: Huh?

CHRISTIAN: How do you know that none of the blind men has the whole truth?

NON-CHRISTIAN: Well, it's just a story.

CHRISTIAN: I know. And it's not a bad one—except I still wonder how the person who first told it could say with such certainty that none of the blind men got it right.

NON-CHRISTIAN: I guess it's because he wasn't blind. What's your point?

CHRISTIAN: My point is that someone sees the whole elephant! In this case it's you.

NON-CHRISTIAN: What's so bad about that?

CHRISTIAN: You're the one who said that *no one* sees the whole elephant! That's what's so bad about it. You're breaking your own rule. You're claiming to have more knowledge than any of those blind men. Are you sure that you want to make that claim?

One can ask "How do you know that?" in a variety of ways. Each way can aid in the task of plausibility construction. Some variations are the following:

- "What makes you believe that?"
- "What convinces you of that?"
- "Where have you heard that?"
- "What is the strongest case for that?"
- "Has someone persuaded you of this perspective?"
- "Have you read some things that have sold you on this?"

The plausibility structure erected by these questions makes a more solid foundation for people's beliefs than just a hackneyed illustration or story.

The great news that we proclaim is, God sees the whole elephant. He has told us what it looks like, and that's why we can know the truth! This claim doesn't mean that we know everything. The Bible itself delineates the parameters of our knowledge: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

We're not arrogant, then, to claim this level of knowledge. It's only by God's grace that He reveals it to us. He wants us to know it, be enlightened by it, find salvation in it, and build our lives upon it.

This is good news, but in our zeal to share it, we sometimes fail to pave the way for belief. If we want to see people transformed by God's truth, instead of being amused by it, we must find ways for them to hear it as something more plausible than the Plug Theory.