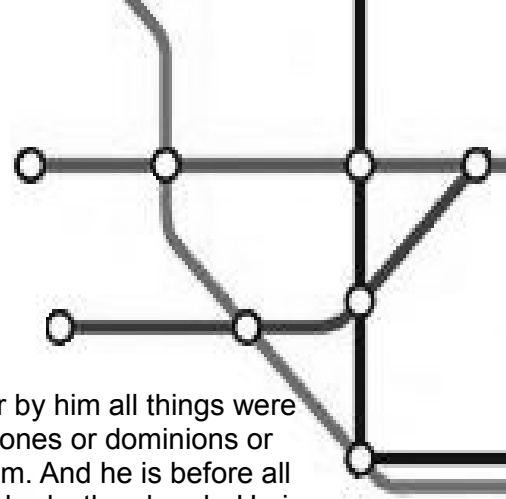


Answering Tough Questions (A Rough Guide)



First Things First

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1 v 15-20

➔ How should this passage prepare us for answering the tough questions our friends have about what we believe?

Look at **1 Peter 3v15**.

- ➔ What is the 'hope' we have?
- ➔ Whose responsibility is this? Should we leave 'apologetics' to the professionals?
- ➔ What should our attitude be as we answer questions about our faith?

The art of 'giving a reason for the hope that we have' is known as *apologetics*.

A definition of apologetics by Alister McGrath:

*"Apologetics can be thought of as having two components. On the one hand it concerns the countering of objections to the Christian faith, and on the other it concerns setting out the attractiveness of the gospel."*¹

Our definition:

"Helping to get our friends from where they are to the cross."

- ➔ Think of one non-Christian friend you know who has questions or difficulties with the Christian faith. Write down some of the questions they have asked (or might ask):

○ *Points of Departure: Where your friends are coming from*

Worldview

- ➔ What happens when you die?
How would you answer this question? How would your friend answer it?

¹Alister E. McGrath, "Evangelical Apologetics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155: 617 (1998): 3-10. Available at http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article_apol_mcgrath.html

People will answer this question according to their **worldview**. Your worldview is the framework you use to interpret the world. Your friends will probably have a very different worldview to yours.

➡ How might your worldviews affect the way you and your friend communicate?

➡ How can you begin to see the differences between your worldviews?

Culture

Culture is different to worldview (although they are connected). It is “the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.”² You may well belong to a different culture to your friend. A person's culture will also affect how they react to the gospel, as certain views and beliefs will have been passed on to them.

➡ Think of some examples of different 'cultures.' How might these different cultures affect how you communicate the gospel?

Climate

Another connected issue is the climate we and our friends are in (sometimes called **postmodernism**). Some fundamental ideas, which our parents took for granted, are now up for debate...

The Place of Truth

We can choose our own truth, and we should not question anyone else's. Tolerance of other views is the ultimate virtue (although it is often used to mean acceptance). What is 'real' and what 'works' is more important than what is 'true.'

The Place of Authority

People hate being told what to do and what to think.

The Place of Spirituality

People are interested in big questions, although in a way which avoids absolute truth and authority.

○ The Destination: Where your friends need to get to

The Gospel is our Ultimate Goal

Ultimately we want our friends to believe in Jesus and the new life that is available only through him. Answering questions is only a means to an end.

➡ What are the key things we want our friends to know?

The gospel is relevant to every aspect of our friends' lives. Wherever they start out, they will never be beyond the scope of the gospel. As we answer questions, we need to always have the ultimate destination in mind.

People (particularly university students!) will usually talk happily about big questions in abstract ways. But the gospel cuts through all of that.

Alternative Destinations

² <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/culture>

If we don't keep in mind that the gospel is our destination, the alternative will be simply winning an argument. What use is it to argue that Jesus rose from the dead if you don't explain why it is important?

Although it might take you a while to get there (perhaps more than one conversation), you haven't finished until you've taken your friends to the cross.

The Limitations of Apologetics

Look at **2 Corinthians 4v1-6**.

- ➔ What stops people from accepting the gospel?
- ➔ How does anyone ever accept the gospel?
- ➔ How does Paul respond?

Apologetics is important in creating “a climate where faith can grow.”³ But there is more to it than that. We can never argue someone into becoming a Christian, no matter how clever we are. Ultimately, faith is a gift from God - he needs to open the eyes of our friends so they can see the glory of Christ. This means it is vital that we explain the gospel as we answer our friends' questions. We also need to recognise that faith is ultimately down to God. We need to pray for them.

Getting from A to B

Barriers and Bridges

There are many potential barriers to someone accepting the gospel. Alister McGrath suggests several:

- Intellectual barriers
- Historical associations of Christianity
- Lack of relevance
- Misunderstandings
- Desire for absolute certainty
- Commitment to another belief system
- Personal integrity of Christians
- Sense of guilt or inadequacy

- ➔ Which of these might apply to the friend you had in mind earlier?

One of our tasks is to remove these barriers. The other is to build bridges by showing where the gospel connects to the lives and situations of our friends.

Answering Questions

There is no simple formula for answering difficult questions about what we believe. It will take work – we will need to spend time and effort working through our friends' questions with them. Instead of giving a list of answers, here are some guidelines to help you tackle questions, whatever they are:

1 Listen

Is this a **genuine** question, or a red-herring? Try asking how their view works in practice. Is there a **question behind the question**? E.g. Questions on gay rights might be based on God's view of homosexuality. Are there any **assumptions** which may be incorrect? E.g. “If the Bible is so full of contradictions, how can you believe what it says about Jesus?”

Repeat what your friend is saying in your own words – this will make sure you are both talking about the same thing, it will help your understanding and it will show that you are listening. It will also reveal any obvious flaws which could be hidden by complicated language.

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Bridge Building: Creative Christian Apologetics* (IVP, 1992):

② Think

Where does this issue fit into the **bigger picture** we see in the Bible. E.g. It is much easier to talk about hell in the context of a fallen world and the hope of eternity than to quote a list of verses. Then think, is this issue addressed by the **Bible**? If it is, where and how? If not, why not? Try hard to talk about **Jesus** – get your friends to engage with a real person instead of abstract theology. What did he say about this issue?

③ Answer

Watch your **attitude** (see below)! Be **clear** – don't use jargon. Use **illustrations** – films, TV, books, news stories – show how what you're saying relates to the real world. Be **'real'** - can you use your own experience? Explain how this truth affects you **personally**. Have you struggled with this situation or question yourself? And be **relevant** - why is this so important? Why should your friend be bothered?

And, of course, **PRAY!** Pray that God would help you to set forth the truth plainly (2 Cor 4v2), and that he would open your friend's blind eyes (2 Cor 4v4).

Attitude is Everything

Look again at 1 Peter 3v15. Peter tells his readers that their attitude is crucial as they speak to their friends. Even a Biblical, clear, well-reasoned answer will be useless if your friends are put off by the way you answer. As you talk to your friends...

Be Gentle

The aim isn't to win an argument or make people look thick. Be gentle, especially when you are talking about difficult subjects or situations.

Be Respectful

Whatever your friend's view, be respectful. Listening to what they are saying and acknowledge their point of view. It should be fine to disagree, but do not show disrespect for what might be strongly held beliefs.

Be Honest

If you don't know the answer, say so. If you struggle with the same question, say so. Don't try to bluff - offer to get back to them if you have to.

Be LOVING

Most importantly, remember why you're doing this – the aim is not to win an argument or prove you are superior. We want people to come to know the Lord Jesus for themselves. Our motivation should be our love for our friends, and this should show in the way we communicate.

🚦 Give it a go

➡ Choose one of the questions you wrote down earlier, and try to answer it. Think about where your friend is coming from, and how you can help them get to the cross. How would you tackle it? Where would you start? What obstacles might there be?

