Confident Conversations

*Talking with non believers without fearing that awkward question*

# 1: Who are these people?!

## The world is changing

The UK is changing. People no longer accept that Christianity is the state religion. There is no assumption that weddings or funerals will be held in a church. Christian values are not taught in schools to the degree they were in decades gone by.

The result is a generation of mixed values, fewer boundaries and freedom to believe and act in a way that, as long as no one gets hurt, anything goes.

The problem is that people are hurting. Self harming amongst teens is at an all time high. Underage drinking is causing more problems than ever before.

We need equipping to talk to those who don’t know about Jesus in a way that is relevant and culturally sensitive.

People feel they are allowed to ask questions. In schools and at home children will question authority more readily than ever before. This culture is not a problem if we believe we have a faith that can stand up to questioning. In fact the questioning culture is our advantage. We should have the right to question the question!

## Sound argument

When I was at Bible College I loved the Philosophy of Religion modules. We studied arguments for the existence of God, the problem of evil, and read answers that had been posed since the church began. Outside of college I had a friend who was a sincere atheist. He worked with my wife and had 101 new awkward questions every day. He was genuinely searching for truth. There was no arrogance about his questions although some of our discussions would get passionate as he could not in any way be persuaded by the arguments I had learned at Bible College. We prayed for him, we prayed with him, he came to church, experienced lively worship and bible based preaching. There is no happy ending to this story except that God used this process to teach me some lessons. We need more than sound arguments because the bible teaches us that the battle is spiritual:

## The battle is won in the air

I hope you don’t mind me talking in terms of warfare. The bible is full of battles but the greatest battle won was at the cross. Now there is a battle for every living soul. But here’s what the bible teaches about any battle God’s people might face.

“Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's.” (2 Chronicles 20:15)

“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.” (2 Corinthians 10:4)

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12)

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them” (John 6:44)

## Two choices: blend in or stand out

So we know that the world is changing. And we know we have a message. And we also know that no one will receive the message without God working in that person. It’s his battle. So what do we do?

In the face of a secularised world the Church has two choices. Christians can acclimatise and blend in, relaxing some of the traditional values and boundaries laid out in the bible in the hope that they will become more relevant to the world, or they can stick with “old school” principles asking him for wisdom and direction in helping him build his Church.

This dilemma is not new.

In his book, The Daniel Dilemma, Chris Hodges outlines how Daniel chose not to cave in to the pressure, culture and practices of the Babylonians even though he was in exile there. He stood out because of his exceptional qualities. I believe God is calling us to do the same.

## Difficult questions

The world might be changing but people are not changing. Some questions they ask are the same questions people have asked for thousands of years. Why did my child die? Why did God allow that Tsunami? What will happen when I die? Other questions are not so old but have still been around for a number of generations. Why is the church so full of hypocrites? Why follow Jesus rather than some other spiritual leader? Hasn’t science disproved most of what we used to believe? Does God really hate gays?

The fact that these questions have gone on for generations suggests that there have been no satisfactory answers. It also means that they are not going away. So here comes the second dilemma. We can either shy away and squirm, avoid the question and hope that our love and lifestyle will win people over, or we can have confident conversations, showing authenticity and love in the process, knowing that although we might not have the answer to our friend’s question, we do believe we have the truth.

So before we start addressing some of the most popular questions asked by non believers, here I just want to set the scene for the following sessions.

## Groundrules

1. **The person is more important than their question.** The question is important because the person is important. Jesus died for people not to win an argument. So let’s deal with all people with love, respect and look for the positive common ground.
2. **The answer might be another question.** You cannot and probably shouldn’t try to answer every question fully. But you can introduce them to God who will meet all their needs if they allow him. In the Gospels Jesus asks many more questions than he answers. To be precise, Jesus asks 307 questions. He is asked 183 of which he only answers 3. Asking questions was central to Jesus’ life and teachings. In fact, for every question he answers directly he asks—literally—a hundred. There is often another question hidden behind the presenting question so sometimes it’s better to follow up with questions like why do you ask that, draw out why it’s important to them as a person. There may be a back story you end up praying for.

Randy Newman: https://billygraham.org/decision-magazine/july-2006-2/answering-questions-with-questions/

*We often want to have perfect answers to people’s questions about the Gospel. But sometimes this can lead to conversations that feel more like sales pitches than meaningful interaction. Veteran evangelist Randy Newman says that answering with a question instead can lead to meaningful conversations about Christ.*

*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, NIV).*

*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.*

*At times 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.*

*So I started answering questions with questions.*

*Once a team of skeptics confronted me. It was during a weekly Bible study for freshman 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 about his roommate’s antagonistic questions. This week, the roommate showed up–along with a handful of like-minded friends.*

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

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

*“Do you believe in hell?” I asked.*

*He appeared as if he’d never seriously considered the possibility. He looked so puzzled, perhaps because he was being challenged when he thought 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?”*

*“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 ensued about God’s holiness, people’s sinfulness and Jesus’ atoning work. Answering questions with questions turned out to be an effective way to share the Gospel.*

1. **Prayer is paramount.** Apart from me you can do nothing. Even whilst talking to someone quietly pray that the person will encounter God for themselves. Pray for the right words, pray for the right questions, ask God to show you why they are really asking what they are asking.
2. **Jesus described unbelievers as lost** Luke 15 – The Lost Sheep, Coin and Son.
3. **Lost people are still of infinite worth**. There is rejoicing when they are back where they belong. Treat your unbelieving friend with love and respect. Jesus loved you and died for you regardless of your attitude. Be nice.
4. **Lost people are lost, however it might seem**. Some people seem confident and happy and may even have the best arguments. But while they are without God they are lost. The sheep may have wandered off happily, the son may have left confidently, but they were just as lost then as they were when they were rescued. However confident, brazened, content they seem or even feel at this time, our goal is to help them see themselves the way God does: lost without him, but with him found into brand new life.
5. **Lost people need help**. The coin might have been dirty, the sheep might have been damaged, the son was destitute. But the woman didn’t throw the coin away, the farmer didn’t reject the messed up sheep and the father welcomed the destitute son. Whatever questions your friend poses, never give up looking for signs that they are coming home to God. Never look down on them for being lost. It’s only by God’s grace that you are not lost.

## Who are these people?

People just like us.

People who need a saviour.

The world is changing but God is not.

The world is changing but people still have the same needs and questions.

Next time we will look at one of the top questions asked by non believers.

# THE QUESTIONS

Questions that have come up from my limited survey seem to fall into 7 categories:

# Evil & Suffering

* Natural disasters
* Human evil
* Hell

# Science vs Faith

* Science disproves God
* No empirical evidence
* Psychology
* Sociology

# The Bible

* Contradictions
* Authority / out of date: “How can you live your life in accordance with an outdated text that was originally written by men?”
* Made up – “Isn't Jesus Christ just a hippie fairy tale that ended badly?”
* Evidence, e.g. resurrection

# Jesus the only way

* Other religions
* Being good is good enough
* Become a follower, even if you don’t believe in God yet, or the son of God. I dare you to talk to him. Read his teachings and have a go at following them. Make a start, give it a try. Love your neighbour.

# The Church

* Hypocrites: “Didn't Trump, both Bushes, and many Americans claim they're Christians? And you're telling me you're like them? What about that bloke Benny something from the TV that keeps pushing people around on stage, rips everyone off and said the world's gonna end in 6 months and then didn't?” … “Why doesn't the church live like Jesus preached?”
* Denominations = divisions: “Protestant Christianity was devised as a way of good old Henry VIII divorcing his many wives, so it's roots are political, hardly a good foundation for life long belief.”
* Cause of war

# Life after Death

* What happens when I die?
* What can be proved?

# Sexuality

* LGBT – Loving God Brings Transformation
* Is sex really just for marriage?