

Let Me Ask You Something

Asking questions is often the best way to connect with a non-Christian.

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"What do you think about the Virgin Mary?" Kathy, a nursing colleague, asked me as we sat down with our cups of coffee. "Excuse me?" I said, blinking in surprise. As she repeated her question, my mind raced. Did she want information about the Virgin Mary? Or did she want to spar with me, knowing I was a Protestant?

I didn't know her very well, but I had a hunch there was something else on her mind. "That is one of the most interesting questions anyone has asked me in a long time," I responded. "Why do you ask?"

She replied, "Well, I know that you're religious. I was wondering, well, we were wondering. . . ." Now it was her turn to scramble a bit.

I drew her out by saying: "I find it fascinating that you think I'm religious. Tell me, what makes you say that?" Kathy explained that the other nurses discussed how much I knew about the Bible and said that religion was very real for me. She added that while she had attended religious schools growing up, she did not know much about the Bible.

I probed further. "I think you're telling me you want to know more about the Bible. Is that correct?" When Kathy nodded, I asked, "A lot of people think the Bible is irrelevant. May I ask why you'd like to know more about it?"

Kathy's eyes filled with tears. She told me her marriage was in trouble and that she was desperate for help. She had tried everything but religion. Now things were so bad she was seeking help from the Bible. I asked her what she thought it would offer to her. Kathy quietly said, "Hope."

When I asked her if she'd like to study the Bible together, she smiled and responded, "I was hoping you'd say that. I didn't know how to ask you, and, well, would you mind if my sister and my mom joined us? I've already told them about you."

Kathy's question about the Virgin Mary was the most religious question she could think to ask someone she considered religious. Her real need was for counsel and help. Had I responded with a theological treatise, I would have missed her heart by miles. Instead, I asked a few questions. I was learning the value of what I call the "question connection"—asking questions to create a conversation in which real issues can be discussed.

Even before Kathy and I talked, I had been learning about the power questions have to create conversations. A friend of mine is fond of repeating a statement she heard at a conference: "Behind every question is a statement, behind every statement is a feeling."

She had experienced this truth years earlier when she had gingerly asked a trusted mentor, "How do you handle depression?" Her mentor quipped, "Oh, I just go out of one depression into the next." End of discussion. My friend longed to talk to her about how depressed and overwhelmed she felt. Behind her question was a statement: "I am depressed." Behind that statement lingered feelings of fear: She was afraid her depression would swallow her up, so she turned to a person she hoped would help her. Had this mentor responded with a few questions rather than a glib statement, the two of them could have connected about what was really going on.

GOING DEEPER

Real conversations take place when we get to the feelings behind statements. Asking questions is one way to do this. Questioning further uncovers the feelings behind the statements. When we can talk about how we truly feel, our lives change.

We miss out on real ministry when we fail to ask good questions. Take evangelism, for example. When most of us learn the nuts and bolts of sharing our faith, we learn to articulate information, to explain the key elements of the gospel. We may even learn to anticipate certain common objections and memorize verses to counter opposition.

These are valuable skills to master. Yet we rarely spend much time learning how to create a conversation within which we can hear what the other person is thinking and feeling. What could happen if we would slow down the verbal exchange by asking good questions, listening intently to hear what the other person is thinking, and, in the spirit of conversation, to talk, truly talk, about the gospel?

When we are ready with answers before we know what the questions are, we miss opportunities to discern people's honest questions. Not too long ago, I was at a retreat with several nursing colleagues. After lunch one day, I went walking along the lakeshore with a coworker. Out of the blue she asked, "Do you believe that only people who are 'born again' go to heaven?" I was thrown off guard by her question. I sensed that there was a story behind it. Pushing back my finely honed evangelism skills, I instead replied, "What an interesting question. What's behind it?"

What tumbled out was a story of years of unrelenting criticism this nurse had received from a family member because she was not "born again." As I listened, I realized that a theological exegesis of several Bible passages about the conversion experience wouldn't have ministered to my friend at all. Instead I asked a series of questions that helped her explore feelings about the criticism that had been heaped on her over the years. In the safety of having been heard, this woman went on to ask me to explain what being born again really meant.

Creating conversations by asking good questions is a skill. Jesus was a master at asking questions. When I read through the Gospel of Mark to track the way Jesus used questions, I found that throughout His ministry of teaching and healing Jesus used questions to explain principles and to expose faulty thinking. He used questions to help people articulate what they wanted from Him. He answered questions with questions. Four types of questions enhance our effectiveness in getting to the real issues people have: probing questions, personal questions, process questions, and provoking questions.

PROBING QUESTIONS

One type of question to master is a probing question. With probing questions we go after more information. Consider Jesus in **Mk. 3:1–6**. He encountered a man with a withered hand, who was probably unable to work and provide for himself. Jesus, sensing the Pharisees were waiting for Him to break the Sabbath by healing the man, probed: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?" Jesus wanted to probe their hearts, to expose their stubbornness, and to appeal to a higher sense of mercy. By asking rather than accusing, His probing question exposed the hardness of their hearts.

Probing questions can be overused. Since probing questions go after information, the questioner needs to be careful not to seek more information than the person is willing to disclose. One way to soften a probing question is to state an observation first, then ask about the observation. When Kathy asked me about the Virgin Mary, a probing question such as, "Why are you asking that?" would have been abrupt. I softened the probe by acknowledging her curious nature when I said, "That is one of the most interesting questions anyone has asked me in a long time." Then I added, "Why do you ask?" By focusing on my observation, I didn't put her on the spot.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

Personal questions are a form of probing question. But more than drawing out additional information, personal questions help people reveal their inner feelings. When I said to Kathy, "A lot of people think the Bible is irrelevant. May I ask why you'd like to know more about it?" I asked her a very personal question. Going beyond her interest or knowledge of religious topics, I asked her why she wanted to know more about the Bible. It was no surprise that Kathy teared up. Her desire to know more about the Bible was linked to the distress she felt in her marriage. My question revealed very personal facts. Because of the potential for personal questions to expose people, it's a good idea to word personal questions in a way that asks permission.

In **Mk. 8:27–33**, Jesus was talking with His disciples as they walked between villages. Jesus asked, "Who do people say I am?" He probed for information and they replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

Then Jesus took the level of questioning deeper when He asked, "But what about you? . . . Who do you say that I am?" Jesus wanted them to disclose what they personally thought. He was asking them to declare themselves.

Later, when Jesus was entering Jericho, a blind man named Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus. The crowd tried to shush him, but Jesus stopped to interact with him. He threw his cloak aside, jumped to his feet, and came to Jesus (**Mk. 10:46–52**).

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.

The blind man replied, "Rabbi, I want to see."

Jesus met Bartimaeus right where he was and asked him a very personal question— what did he want? I can almost see the crowd around them, shoving and pushing to get a closer look at what was going on. But in the middle of the commotion, Jesus had a private exchange with a man who responded to a very personal question by asking for the most important thing he could imagine— sight.

PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process questions guide what's going on during a conversation. When I was talking to my nursing colleague by the lake, I sensed that she was divulging more than she had wanted to say. I backed up the conversation and said, "I sense this is difficult for you to talk about. Is this something you want me to know about? I'm glad to listen."

That gave my colleague permission to stop the conversation or choose to continue.

She told me, "I'm glad I can talk to someone about this. I never have before today.

I didn't know how hurtful this family member's criticism has been to me until now. So I've never wanted to talk about religion."

Process questions also give the questioner insight into how another person is handling a situation. Recently, an 85-year-old woman was informed that her kidneys were shutting down and that she needed to begin dialysis to stay alive. Her decision was literally a life-and-death decision. This woman asked her daughter what to do. The daughter gently responded, "Mom, I can't tell you what to do. The decision needs to be yours." The mother decided not to go on dialysis, but to let nature take its course.

When the daughter described this exchange to my friend, she helped her process the events by asking, "What is it like for you to know your mother is choosing to die?" Questions like these helped that daughter process her feelings, to tell someone about the weight she was carrying.

PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS

Provocative questions generate thoughtful conversations. They get to the heart of the matter. One time I said to a group of nurses who were waiting for a patient to arrive, "You all mention the name of Jesus freely. Tell me, what do you really think about Him?" After the snickers died down, my question provoked a lively conversation. Each of them had plenty to say. No one had ever asked them before. Over the next several days, conversations about the Lord grew out of this discussion.

Jesus excelled at provocative questions. He sparred with those who tested Him, with those who refused to believe. When the teachers of the law and the elders approached Him and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things?" Jesus answered them with a provocative question: "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism— was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!" (**Mk. 11:27–33**). Though they had tried to trap him, Jesus' provocative question put them on the defensive.

Provocative questions create conversation and discussion. Behind opinions reside statements. And behind statements reside feelings—even in a lively exchange. Sometimes an energized discussion will allow feelings and opinions to emerge that otherwise would stay hidden.

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Questions open doors into another person's life. Good questions aren't easy to formulate or use. It's simpler to make statements and express opinions than to ask questions. Asking questions requires us to focus on the other person. It also implies that we need to listen to and value what the other person has to say.

Learning to ask questions that create conversations is a skill any of us can master. Asking questions demonstrates that we care. As people feel heard and valued, they will tell us more in response to good questions.

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