

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #58: HOW TO ANSWER RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS

By John Temples

1 Peter 3:15 in the KJV reads: “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and **be ready always to give an answer** [defense, NKJV] to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.”

Have you noticed that this is a **command**? It is not a suggestion--it is not optional. There is another passage like unto it, Colossians 4:6, which says, “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know **how you ought to answer each man.**” These Scriptures assume that people will ask questions about our faith and practice. We ought to welcome such questions. And every Christian should, to whatever extent their abilities and opportunities allow, be able to give some kind of reasonable answer to a sincere question. Ignorance, Biblically speaking, is not bliss!

What is the biggest impediment to evangelism by church members today? Is it not the fear of being asked a question that you cannot answer? Let’s see if we can do something to help this situation. Let us look at some kinds of questions people ask and give some suggestions for dealing with them.

KINDS OF RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

First (and hopefully the most common): the sincere question. This is a question asked by someone with no agenda, no hidden motive, but simply a desire to find the truth.

Here are some Biblical examples of sincere questions:

- “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37).
- “Thomas said to Him, Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” (John 14:5).

- “I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?” (Acts 8:34, the question asked by the Ethiopian eunuch upon reading the prophecy of Jesus in Isaiah 53).

How do you answer a sincere question? With a sincere answer--fully, openly, and without hesitation. Observe how Jesus answered questions. To some whose motives were wrong, He gave evasive or cryptic answers. But sincere questions received an immediate and clear answer.

Second: the premature question. This is a question asked by a person who has not had enough Bible teaching to fully understand the answer. Example: you are studying with a prospect about the authority and inspiration of the Bible, and suddenly she asks about the use of instrumental music in worship, or what some passage in Revelation means.

How do you deal with a premature question? You have to be careful and pray for wisdom. You don't want to douse a spark of desire for knowledge; on the other hand, you don't want to overwhelm the questioner with concepts beyond their level of understanding. You don't want to pluck the rose before it has bloomed. You might say, “Let's finish our study on the authority of the Bible, and your question on music will probably get answered. If not, then I will answer it at that time.”

Third: the loaded question. A loaded question is like a loaded gun--dangerous. This is a question that comes with a false or questionable presupposition “pre-loaded” into it. A loaded question is asked in such a way as to put pressure on you to give the answer the questioner wants. It's a means of “setting you up.” The basic purpose of a loaded question is **entrapment**.

The classic example of a loaded question is, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” If you answer yes, you imply that you were beating your wife previously but you are not now beating her. If you answer no, that says that you were beating your wife in the past and you are still beating her. Either answer causes you to imply something you did not intend to imply.

A lawyer may ask a defendant, “How fast were you going when you rammed into the other car?” This question comes “pre-loaded” with the assumption that the accident was your fault; you rammed the other car.

Religious questions can be loaded questions. Have you ever been asked this one--“Do you agree with the Church of Christ teaching that you are the only people going to heaven?” That is a loaded question. A possible answer might be, “I believe that only faithful Christians will go to heaven. Now let’s take our Bibles and see who is a faithful Christian.”

The Jewish leaders asked Jesus many loaded questions, such as:

- “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”
- “Which is the greatest commandment in the law?”
- The Sadducees proposed a riddle to Jesus: a woman was married to seven men in this life, and all the husbands died. They asked, “In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?” This question assumes that she would be somebody’s wife in the resurrection--a classic loaded question. Jesus gave them an unexpected answer: “You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God; for in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven” (Matthew 22:29-30).

You and I must be especially watchful for loaded questions. How might we deal with them? One way would be to ask for clarification. Another would be to point out the “loaded” nature of the question (the questioner might not even realize that he had asked a loaded question) and/or to say, “Did you really mean to ask that question in that way?”

Fourth: the leading question. Closely related to a loaded question, a leading question is one that is worded so as to suggest, or lead to, a particular answer. When people ask leading questions, they are not seeking information; rather, they are seeking affirmation. They already know (or think they know) the answer to the question; they just want you to approve or validate their position. And they phrase the question in such a way as to steer you toward giving the correct answer (correct in their view).

Have you ever been asked, as I have, “Don’t you agree with most educated people that evolution is the correct explanation for the origin of life?” This is probably both a loaded and a leading question. You’ve been put on the spot--if you say “no, I don’t agree,” then you are saying you’re not an educated person. If you say “yes, I agree,” then you’ve lost your Biblical high ground. You might answer that truth is not decided by a poll of educated people; it is decided by Scriptural statements and hard facts or evidence.

You might study with a person who is living in a sinful situation. The person asks a leading question: “Don’t you think God wants me to be happy?” The short answer to that question could be, “Yes, God wants you to be happy; but more important than that, He wants you to be **holy**. Happiness will be a natural byproduct of holiness.”

The rich young ruler asked Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17). Was this a sincere question? Possibly. But sadly, it seems to me that he was trying to impress Jesus. The fact that he called Jesus “good teacher” smacks of flattery. At the least, he had a very superficial view of righteousness. It’s likely that he knew what Jesus would say: keep the commandments. He was ready to brag that he had kept all of them from his youth. He was not looking for information, but affirmation.

Peter was evidently looking for praise when he asked Jesus, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21) The Jewish rabbis taught that one was only obligated to forgive another three times for the same offense. Peter doubtless thought that he was being unusually liberal and generous in proposing to forgive seven times. Of course Jesus shocked him with His answer--“unto seventy times seven” (without limit).

When someone asks you, “Don’t you think...?,” watch out for a leading question. The questioner may be looking for praise, or to steer you toward affirming a particular position. When asked what you think, a good answer is, “It’s not important what you or I think in religion; we need to see what the Bible says.”

Fifth: the hypothetical question. This could also be called the “yes but” or “what if” question. Usually a person asking such a question is trying to justify some questionable practice or position, or they are trying to deflect the thrust of the truth because it is getting too close to them. Here are some “what if” questions:

- “What if a man is run over on the way to the baptistery?”
- “What if we discover life on other planets?”
- “What if Bob marries Suzy, then divorces her, then marries Joan, blah, blah, blah?”

How do you deal with hypothetical questions? You might give a brief answer from the Bible if you can. Or you might just say, “That question has no bearing on your situation or mine; so it would not be beneficial to spend time trying to answer it.”

Sixth: the unanswerable question. Examples:

- Where was the man when he jumped off the bridge? (Think about it.)
- Where did God come from?
- Can God make a rock so large that He cannot lift it?
- What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object?
- Why do bad things happen to good people? (This question is partially answerable; but we simply cannot neatly “tie a bow” on every situation. And after all, something that in an unbeliever’s view is “bad” may actually be “good” in God’s view.)

How do you answer unanswerable questions? Obviously, you don’t. Memorize these three words: “I don’t know.” Don’t be afraid to use them. And again, point out that they are not relevant to anybody’s real situation.

Seventh: the rhetorical question. This is a question that would normally be asked by a teacher rather than a student. A rhetorical question is a question that is asked to teach or to make a point. It is not a question asked to gain information, but to encourage contemplation.

The Bible contains many rhetorical questions:

- “Shall I fall down [bow down] before a block of wood?” (Isaiah 44:19)
- “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)
- “Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1)
- “Who do men say that I am?... Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:13, 15)

The ability to ask penetrating and pertinent rhetorical questions is a skill worth cultivating. Again, study the rhetorical questions of Jesus.

Eighth: the irrelevant question or academic question. Like the hypothetical question, it is a question the answer to which might be interesting, but is of no practical use or importance. Often, the purpose of such a question is to sidetrack the teacher or change the subject.

The quintessential irrelevant question is, “Where did Cain get his wife?” This is sometimes asked by people who are trying to poke holes in the creation account of Genesis. This question, though, IS answerable. Genesis 5:4 says, “After he begot Seth, the days of Adam were eight hundred years; and he had sons and daughters.” Cain obviously married one of his relatives. But, to paraphrase a certain politician, “What difference does it make?”

Some other irrelevant questions are: (1) What law were people under between the crucifixion and Pentecost? (2) What about the thief on the cross? (3) Is there life on other planets? Again, these questions can be answered; but they are just interesting discussion questions, not related to anybody’s actual situation today. Here is a possible answer to an irrelevant or academic question: “That is an interesting question, and when we get through dealing with what you and I need to do today to please God and be saved, we might deal with it.”

Ninth: the emotional question. This one is closely related to the leading question:

- “If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why does He allow ____ (fill in the blank)?”
- “Why is ____ happening to me?”

- “Are you saying that my mother and daddy are going to hell because they weren’t baptized for remissions of sins?”

The best answer to that last question that I have found is, “God will deal with your mother and daddy based on what they knew and what they did. However, what He does with them has absolutely no bearing on what YOU need to do, knowing what you know.”

Another often-asked emotional question is, What will happen to people who have “never seen a Bible” or never heard of Jesus Christ? Again, this question is answerable from Scripture, but (a) the answer is involved and requires time; and (b) the questioner may already have her mind made up on it, and logic will not sway her. Perhaps a good answer would be, “God will be the judge of such people, and we know that His judgment will be perfectly just; but whatever the answer is to that question, we know it does not apply to you and me; because we both HAVE heard the gospel! What we really should be asking is, What will happen to people who HAVE seen a Bible and learned the truth, and not obeyed it?”

SOME WAYS OF ANSWERING RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS

Just as there are different types of questions, there are several different ways to answer them. Here are some:

First: give a direct, unequivocal, complete answer. If it is a sincere question from an honest heart, then just answer it. Sometimes, “just the facts, Ma’am” is the correct response.

Second: answer a question with another question. Jesus often did that:

- “Why do you test Me?” (Response of Jesus to the question of paying taxes to Caesar, Mark 12:15).
- “And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?’ (Luke 10:25-26).

- Someone might ask you, “Do you think it is wrong to take a social drink?” You might answer, “Do you think you would be a good influence by doing so?” Or, “have you ever known anyone who complained because their spouse did not drink enough?”

Third: answer a question with a story or illustration. Going back to Luke 10, Jesus asked the lawyer, “What does the law say?” The lawyer answered, “Love God with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said, “Correct!” But note verse 29: “But [the lawyer], *wanting to justify himself*, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Fourth: answer a question with a direct quote from Scripture. This, of course, is the ultimate best answer that can be given to any question. (Although you might experience what happened to a preacher when a woman stopped him on the street and said, “You’re that preacher who says people have to be baptized to be saved, aren’t you?” He said, “Yes, Ma’am.” The woman said, “I just don’t see that.” He handed her his Bible and said, “Here is the word of God--please read Mark 16:16 and tell me what it says.” “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” The preacher asked, “Well?” She replied, “Well, that’s just your opinion.”)

Fifth: don’t be ashamed to say you need time for study and reflection before giving an answer. I’ve often been asked questions in Bible classes that I delay answering. I want to be sure of my answer and not give an “off the cuff” response that I might later regret or wish I had phrased differently. Just be sure that if you ask for a delay, you follow up and deliver an answer when you promise to.

When you are dealing with questions, remember these things:

- There are many different kinds of questions and more than one way to answer a question.
- Pray for wisdom to know how to answer everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you (God promised to give it, James 1:5).
- Above all, be slow to speak, and answer with fear, trembling, and grace.
- Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know” or “Let me ask someone and get back to you.”

- Consider it an honor to be asked a Bible question.
- And remember: “Be ready to answer” is a command!

--John Temples