

Five Steps for Answering Any Tough Question

Andy Bannister

Solas (www.solas-cpc.org)

The fear of being asked a tough question holds many Christians back from sharing their faith, or can make us nervous about evangelism; but this morning I want to teach you a simple set of steps that can help us respond to almost any question, whether an easy one or a tough one!

THE CHURCH AND QUESTIONS

But let's begin by noting that sadly, sometimes the Church has a poor reputation when it comes to questions. A few years ago I was chatting with a university student who told me, with a note of sadness in his voice, "I used to be a Christian, but I'm not any longer."

"What happened?" I asked.

"It's simple really," the student replied. "I was raised in a very, very fundamentalist church but in my teens, discovered a love for science. So when it was time for university, I came here to the University of Toronto to study biology. Very quickly it became obvious there were massive contradictions between what I was being taught at university and what my church had taught me about origins, the book of Genesis, that kind of stuff. So I booked an appointment to see my pastor and ask his help."

"Great idea," I said, "there are some brilliant books and resources on that question—did your pastor direct you to some that could help?"

"Not exactly."

"Oh? What did he say?"

"He was dismissive," the student said, his voice now angrier. "*Totally* dismissive. He looked at me and said, 'Oh it's really easy son, really easy; you choose the Bible or you choose biology. Next question, please.'"

"So what did you do?"

"Simple. I chose biology."

I confess that conversation moved me almost to tears. For whilst I was thankfully able to introduce the student to some useful resources written by Christians in the sciences, there had been a tremendous amount of damage done, because his pastor had dismissed his perfectly valid question. He hadn't asked a

question back, he hadn't engaged the young man in dialogue, he hadn't offered *any* help. And in so doing, he'd convinced the student that that Christianity *had* no answers.

As we speak with our friends, neighbours, and colleagues it is essential that if they have questions or objections to our faith, we do our very best to address them.

In a minute, I'm going to show you five simple steps you can use for beginning to answer all kinds of questions. But before that, briefly, some crucial principles when we have these kind of conversations with friends.

First, remember our task is ultimately to answer the *questioner*, not the *question*. Behind every question is a person, with a story (like my friend at the University of Toronto).

Second, remember to clarify a question. You might ask things like "What do you mean by ...?" or "Why do you think ...?" — the questions we learnt in my first session.

And third, be willing to admit your limitations. If your friend has asked a question you don't know the answer to, admit this, but offer to go and find the answer for them.

LEARNING TO S.H.A.R.E. AN ANSWER

So with those basic principles in place, how do we respond to a friend with a tough question or objection to the gospel. I think there are five helpful steps to go through and to make them easy to remember, I've turned them into an acronym: SHARE.

S is for *sympathise*. When someone asks a question, make a connection; affirm the questioner. For example you might say that you had that question in the past. Or you might say "That's a great question ...". Anything that builds rapport with the person you're speaking to.

H is for *hidden assumptions*. Just like an iceberg, a question often has lots of assumptions lurking below the surface. So before we offer our thoughts, it can be helpful to identify those assumptions.

A is for *apply the Bible*. As we address our friend's question, we want to gently invite our friends to think about their question from the perspective of the gospel. A question that may look daunting initially can sometimes look very different when you walk to the foot of the cross and consider it from there.

R is for *retell the gospel story through the question*. This is vital: we don't want to just play intellectual games, or even offer pastoral wisdom. We want our friends to see Jesus more clearly. So it's always important to consider how we can do that through an answer.

Finally E is for *equip* your friend. If your friend has asked a complex question, it's likely that in a brief conversation you can only say so much. So can you direct them to a resource: a video, a podcast, an article, a book—anything they can follow up later.

Those are the five steps that I try to use whenever I'm faced with a tough question from a friend, neighbour, or colleague; and I hope the SHARE acronym makes them easy to remember. But what do these five steps look like in practice, I hear you cry? That's a great question—so let's take a look at a couple of sample questions.

EXAMPLE #1: PAIN AND SUFFERING

One of the most common questions I hear about Christianity concerns the issue of evil and suffering. “How can you be a Christian,” someone may ask, “given the messy, broken, hurting world we find ourselves in?” Sometimes the question comes in sharper, more personal form: if God is good, why did my friend get attacked, or my sister die of cancer? Let's think about how we might offer an answer using the SHARE method I outlined above—because of time, I'll offer just a few thoughts of what I might say under each step, but in a real-world conversation you would want to go slower and more carefully, not least when the topic, like this one, is potentially so pastorally sensitive.

SYMPATHISE

I would begin by thanking the person for their question and, if they talked about their personal experience of pain or injustice, thank them for their honesty. I will often add that this is an issue I've personally thought and wrestled about over the years, not least when evil or suffering has struck close to home. A family friend of ours was once attacked in the street on his way home from work and beaten up so violently, he was never able to work again. Whilst ten years ago, when first trying to start a family, we experienced several miscarriages—and the pain of failed pregnancy after failed pregnancy caused us to wrestle with this question in a deeply personal way.

HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS

But of course it's not just Christians who need to wrestle with the question of suffering and evil. If you are an atheist there are questions, too. For example, why does evil, or injustice, or pain seem so wrong? After all, if humans are just a random assortment of atoms, why does it matter what happens to them? Furthermore, have you ever wondered from where we get the idea that suffering and death aren't right? And once when we start throwing labels like “good” and “evil” around, what do mean by them? Aren't those words just personal preferences in a godless universe? I wonder whether Christianity, although it has some questions to answer here, does give us a far better framework for speaking of “good” and “evil”. As the C. S. Lewis, who was an atheist for almost half his life, wrote:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.¹

APPLY THE BIBLE

One of the things I find so helpful about Christianity is that the Bible is refreshingly honest about evil and suffering and on its very first page talks about the fact that that the world is not the way that God intended it to be, but that something has gone radically wrong with God's good creation, caused as human beings tried to throw God out of the picture and make themselves the centre of the story.

But the Bible is also clear that pain and suffering, evil, and death will not have not the last word. For the Bible also tells the much bigger story of God's plan to restore and renew his creation and to destroy evil once and for all. I wonder whether when we naturally react with horror at suffering, or death, or injustice, we're actually revealing that instinctively, in the very deepest fibre of our being, we know the Bible's take on evil and suffering is true.

RETELL THE GOSPEL

Have you ever wondered that what most of us want when it comes to evil and suffering is not something *said* about it, but something *done* about it? Indeed we admire those who dedicate their lives to alleviating suffering, who demonstrate compassion.

Compassion is a fascinating word. Comprised of two Latin words, 'com' (meaning with) and 'passion' (meaning suffer), compassion literally means "to suffer alongside". In other words, compassion means to do something about suffering at such cost to yourself, that you literally suffer too.

At the heart of my Christian faith lies my in a God who hasn't just *said* something about suffering, but a God who, in the cross of Jesus Christ, has *done* something about evil and suffering, defeating and disarming it at Calvary. But that defeat came at a great price: we see in Jesus a God of compassion. A God who not merely gives us the only ability to name evil for what it is, but a God, who in Jesus, dealt with it and given us the certain hope that one day, evil will be gone for ever.

EQUIP YOUR FRIEND

There is much more that could be said (and your friend may have many questions as you share some of the above). This is an area where I find it especially helpful to be aware of good resources, especially books that I can give to those who have are struggling personally with suffering. Three that are particularly helpful are Sharon Dirckx's book *Why?: Looking At God, Evil & Suffering: Looking at God*,

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Collins, 1990) p. 31.

Evil & Personal Suffering, Amy Orr-Ewing's *Where is God in All the Suffering* and Jeremy Marshall's *Beyond the Big C: Hope in the Face of Death*. All three authors come at the question of God and suffering from both a biblical as well as a very personal perspective.

EXAMPLE #2: THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS IN A WORLD OF OTHER FAITHS

Our third example question is one that I hear ever more frequently given the pluralistic world we live in: “How can you claim that Christianity is uniquely true, given there are so many other religions?” (Or more bluntly: “Aren't Christians arrogant for their insistence that it's their way or the highway?”)

SYMPATHISE

Again, it's important to build a connection with the person asking the question—not least because they may have friends or family members in other faiths. I remember once being asked this question by a Christian student who was struggling with this issue because her best friend was a Muslim. Asking your friend *why* they ask this question may be especially helpful as it can bring out any personal connection. And I'll often talk about friends and colleagues who are in different faith traditions, my love and respect for them, and so forth.

HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS

There are, of course, lots of assumptions in this question. First up is the issue that it assumes that only Christians make exclusive claims. So I'll often ask: “What precisely is it about *Christian* exclusivity that you find difficult? After all, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews—even atheists—all think that their beliefs are true and that others are therefore wrong. Even if you try to say *all* religions are true, you're excluding those who think only one is. Indeed, I wonder if there's something about the very nature of truth that makes it exclusive? After all, Paris is either the capital of France or it isn't; the freezing point of water at sea level is either 0C; the plastic dinosaur is either in the salad bowl or it isn't—and so on. So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that truth is also exclusive when it comes to religion?”

APPLY THE BIBLE

One problem here is that there's a lot of confusion about the word “god”, and we can sometimes assume that everybody means the same thing when they say they talk about “god”. So that it's crucial to know *which* god we are talking about.

Furthermore, whilst many people will say things like “But maybe every religion leads to God” I would argue that *only* the Bible claims we can get to God. Some religions teach they can lead you to non-existence, the annihilation of self. Some, like Islam, promise they can lead you to Paradise—an eternal

life of which the Qur'an describes in terms of rivers of wine, fruit trees, crystal clear fountains of water, and beautiful young women for the men; but God is very much absent from the picture. By contrast, only the Bible offers the promise of an eternal life of close communion with God—unique to the Bible is the teaching that God is deeply relational. The God of the Bible walks with Adam and Eve in Genesis, dwells with his people in the age to come in Revelation, and stepped into history, personally, in the person of Jesus as he came to deal with our brokenness and rebellion that separates us from him.

RETELL THE GOSPEL

Mention of Jesus, of course, reminds us too of something crucial—and I will often ask: “Have you ever wondered about the fact that all this talk of exclusivity comes *from Jesus*. It’s Jesus who said ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life; nobody comes to God the Father except through me.’” Christians are simply doing our best to faithfully follow what he said and share the news of what Jesus makes possible with others.

Jesus was, in many ways, arguably the most anti-religious founder of any major religion, spending most of his time not sucking up to the religious elites of his day but critiquing them, loudly and publicly. Why? Because religion can be really dangerous, leading you to assume that if you think or do the right stuff, you can climb your way upwards to heaven whilst looking down on others on your way up. Religion also often becomes *all about you*: “Look at *my* good works, you bunch of lightweights!” By contrast, the good news of the Bible is that’s not all about you but all about Jesus; the God of the Bible doesn’t ask us to climb up to him, but in Jesus climbed down to us. Do all religions lead to God? Maybe *no* religion leads to God, but God can lead us to God, and has done so in the person of Jesus.

EQUIP YOUR FRIEND

This is a huge topic, and it can be worth having a few books and resources to hand that you can pass on to your friend. Three books that I’ve found helpful: *Three Theories of Everything* written by former Buddhist monk turned Christian, Ellis Potter; *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, the powerful autobiography of Nabeel Qureshi’s journey from Islam to Christianity; and my own (shameless plug!) *Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?* Whilst if a video would be more appropriate for your friend, again check out the Solas *Short Answers* series—search for “religions” at www.solas-cpc.org.

CONCLUSION

With practice, you can use the SHARE approach on almost any question about your faith—just remember, it’s not a legalistic set of rules to be followed, but an easy to remember framework to help guide your conversation with a questioner.

As we seek to answer the questions of our friends and colleagues, it's also crucial to remember that we can't create faith by what we do, but we can with wisdom, humility, kindness, and the Holy Spirit's empowering, maybe remove some of the debris that prevents people seeing Jesus clearly.

In a moment, we'll have some Q&A. But just to let you know today's session was drawn from a chapter in my new book, [*How To Talk About Jesus Without Looking Like an Idiot.*](#)