

Good news for God's world

Advance in Faith 1 – Unit 8

Lesson 6 Questions people ask



Introduction

Over the last six weeks, we've been developing our understanding of how to share the good news with God's world. We examined Jesus' gospel, the good news according to Jesus. We looked at our culture, the attitudes and beliefs of people we're communicating with. We listened in on some of Jesus' conversations, to learn how he understood and cared for each person uniquely.

Tonight we're asking about how to help people overcome barriers that prevent them placing their trust in Jesus. In recent years, Olive Tree Media surveyed Australians regarding blockages to faith. We need to engage with these issues, in order to engage with people.

First, a reminder: we don't have to solve all these issues for people. It's more a matter of considering how to respond—with gentleness and respect.

So what are we to do? Listen! Hear what this person is saying and why the issue is important for them. The goal is to care for the person, not to combat them over the issues.

1. Why does the church condemn homosexuals?

Even before Australia changed the law to redefine marriage, one in every 3 or 4 Australians (29%) said that the church's stand on homosexuality was a significant barrier to belief.

If people raise this issue with you, explore why it matters to them. Are they opposed because of what they're read in the media, or because it's a hot topic in our culture? Have they or their loved ones experienced unloving attitudes from Christians? Or is it part of a broader issue for them, perhaps a view that sex in general is a "private" matter and the church should stay out of it?

Once you understand the person and the reason for their views, how do you respond?

- You may not need to respond directly: it may be enough that you have allowed them to express their views, and you may be able to move on to talking about Jesus.
- If they have experienced hate against gays from Christians, grieve with them that this is not how Jesus would react.
- If their concern is sexuality in general, talk about God's good intentions for sex. The marriage commitment gives the safest setting humanly possible for two different (complementary) humans to unite their love and lives, and the most secure setting to nurture children. Promiscuity (including homosexual promiscuity) demeans people and creates all kinds of diverse bonds for selfish reasons, i.e. unfaithfulness is not true love.

- More generally, why stick labels on people? Sexuality does not define a person's value. God values people.

Preston Sprinkle was doing PhD research on this issue, and realized that he wasn't actually engaging with gay people. Meeting them, hearing their stories, and engaging with them gave him a far richer understanding. Check out his short film, *Dear Church, I'm Gay*:

<https://vimeo.com/231166638>

His Grace and Truth series provides more detail:

<https://store.centerforfaith.com/>

Engaging with people on this sensitive topic requires us to know two things: what God intends as valid expressions of our sexuality (e.g. Romans 1:24-32), and how to present our views with graciousness and respect (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). If we can get those two things right, we'll understand that "gay-bashing" and "anything goes" are not the only alternatives. There is a third way: holding respect for what is right, as well as holding respect for people who differ. John Dickson writes on how to have respectful debate:

<https://publicchristianity.org/library/time-for-some-nuance-between-the-gay-and-the-god-fearing>

Brian Harris (Baptist college principal here in Perth) also has some suggestions on how Christians respond the redefinition of marriage:

<http://brianharrisauthor.com/post-plebiscite-reflections/>

In the end, some people will refuse to come to faith because they don't want to submit to Jesus as Lord. But let's make sure that the way we represent Jesus to them is appropriate: transparent honesty combined with true empathy.

2. How can God condemn people to hell?

25% of Australians say that the church's teaching on hell is a significant blocker for belief. They struggle to believe in a god who wants to torment people for ever—a god who tells us to love our enemies, but inflicts endless agony on his.

Many within the church struggle with this as well:

- Some (like Rob Bell) veer towards universalism (the belief that God's love will somehow reach everyone in the end).
- Others (like John Stott) view eternal condemnation as annihilation (missing out) rather than endless torment.

Whatever view you take, you must do business with what Jesus said about hell (e.g. Mark 9:42-48). Look at who he directed his warnings against. He never once threatened the godless with hell—only God's people. This at least suggests that we should understand his warnings in the context of Israel's responsibilities, and particularly in light of

Jeremiah's pronouncements about the Valley of Hinnom (Jeremiah 7:30-34; 19:1-9; 32:28-35).

We are out of line if we use hell as the motivation for evangelism. Following the resurrection, Jesus did not say, "Well, I'm back from the dead and I can tell you there's a really scary hell to escape." He spoke much about God's kingdom (Acts 1:3), not about hell.

Look how the disciples presented the gospel in Acts. They never once said, "Believe, so you don't go to hell." In all Paul's letters, he never says, "Get your Grandma saved so she doesn't go to hell." That's a radical misunderstanding of the gospel, a misrepresentation of God.

The Bible does talk about *judgement*, but this is not primarily about condemnation; it is about God putting things right—dealing with evil, and releasing the oppressed. When Israel prayed for God to *judge* them, they were appealing to God to set right what was wrong (e.g. Isaiah 11:3-4; 33:22). The NT (New Testament) has a great deal to say about God's wise judgements, and about the cross as the place where God judged evil. But once again we are misreading the Bible if we think of judgement merely as condemnation.

Given the absence of anyone in Acts or in the NT letters threatening people with hell, don't try to argue this point as a way of bringing people to belief:

- If someone raises hell as an issue, explore what they are thinking and why it is an issue. Don't argue.
- Explore whether they believe God should one day set things right. Many people do have this sense of justice.
- If it is a serious barrier, acknowledge that some Christians struggle with the issue too. Focus on how God has taken evil and dealt with it in his cross.

This does not have to be a barrier to faith. There is no requirement to believe in hell before you can believe in Jesus. Present the grace of the God who loved us and gave himself for us. Do so graciously, in a manner consistent with "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).

3. How can God allow suffering?

Why do bad things happen to good people? Often this is a genuine question, asked in pain (either the person's own pain, or the pain of someone they love). The question is as old as Job; and if you have a simple answer it's probably as clichéd as Job's comforters.

There are two big mistakes people make in response to this question. The first is *to try to justify God*, e.g. "God knows what he's doing; he's not unjust." Job's friends made this mistake. Don't even try to defend God.

The second mistake is *to try to justify the suffering*, e.g. "There's always a reason for the pain, even if we don't know what it is."

Worse still: "Our pain is meant to draw us close to God." To a suffering person, that can portray God as some kind of sadistic monster. Much of what happens in our world is not right. If you think the world is just, you have not understood Jesus.

Our first response must be empathy—sitting with the person to share in their pain (Job 2:13). It's what Jesus did: he became "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3).

Jesus entered our pain, our brokenness, our death. He wept. He was betrayed by a trusted friend, rejected by his own people, condemned to death by a ruler who had declared him innocent.

Believers are called to suffer also: to take up our cross, to share abundantly in Christ's sufferings (2 Corinthians 1:5), to be the body where Jesus experiences on-going suffering (Colossians 1:24).

Triumphalism won't do: we are called to empathy. You know this in your bones, for you have probably had your unfair share of suffering. But we face suffering in hope. We know that God will set the world right one day (the judgement we spoke of above). The resurrection gives us that hope—the certainty that God will do for the whole of creation what he did for Jesus that Easter morning.

The sufferings we experience right now make no sense to us, but they are not the end of the story. God will have the last word. In the meantime, God's presence sustains us. The God who comes into our world to bear our suffering is the God we trust.

His Holy Spirit sustains us through our suffering. Within us, he intercedes with groans too deep for words. Within us, he brings his future to birth (Romans 8:18-27). We are the visible expression of God's mercy in the troubled world.

Built into this question is an awareness that the world is not as it should be. Why do people have this sense of injustice? Where does it come from?

In the words of C. S. Lewis:

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. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?¹

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 38.

4. How can I believe when the church is full of hypocrites?

This is one of the biggest barriers to faith. It takes many forms, e.g.:

- child abuse by priests
- religion causes wars
- crusades/inquisitions
- experiences of being hurt / let down by Christians.

There can be no excuse for evil, so don't make excuses. The only defence is a *genuine* life: a life where believers are living kingdom-of-God truth, introducing his reign, making a difference in God's world.

You may be able to point to just how much difference believers have made, despite our failures and inadequacies. John Ortberg points out some of the world-changing differences that Jesus has made in the last 2000 years—available as a book or video:

- John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man?* (Zondervan, 2012)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkyWFMfBagA>

The bulk of help given in Australia comes from Christians (and very little from atheists). But in the end it will be your genuineness, openness, transparency, and love that form your answer.

Regarding wars, you may need to study Jesus' teaching on non-violence so you are ready to practice what he preached, e.g.:

- Preston Sprinkle. *Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence.* (David C Cook, 2013)

5. How can you say there is only one true religion?

Western society is pluralist. People say things like:

- All religions are valid and basically teach the same thing.
- Each religion sees part of the truth, but none sees the whole.
- You are arrogant if you think your religion is right and want to convert others.

Indeed, there are many gods that people worship, and they are not all the same. Some gods are deist (far away, not involved in our lives.) Others are pantheist (the good force everywhere in nature.) When people use the word *god*, it might be useful to explore what they mean.

The Christian message is that there is one God, the creator. He knows truth, but I know only part of it. In fact, a considerable part of what I believe probably is wrong, so I need to hold it lightly and be open to other ways of seeing the world.

In the Christian worldview, the creator God got involved with us as a human. This provided the most astounding picture of what God is like, and it was radically different from what we might have thought.

A God who loves us and gives himself to us and for us—this is the most amazing message!

Having loved us like this, the resurrection of Jesus is the thing that really sets Christianity apart. No other religion makes this kind of claim. If this is true, *everything* is different. If it is false, Christians are pitifully misguided, hoping for something that will never happen (1 Corinthians 15:12-15).

These pluralist objections are actually self-contradictory. They argue against absolutes, but the claim that there are no absolutes is an absolute claim! It may help to point out this inconsistency, but it is usually better to tell the story of Jesus and his resurrection.

6. Doesn't science disprove Christianity?

In the last 300 years, Europe experienced a change described as the Enlightenment. Scientific study of cause-and-effect has dominated Western thinking. To show something is true, you develop a hypothesis and then test it in a laboratory. The scientific method has really helped us understand how things work.

Don't get trapped into a debate about creation verses evolution. Even if you are an expert scientist who's up to date with all the current research, debating it is unlikely to resolve matters of faith. Genesis is not addressing twenty-first century science questions. It's about how God designed the universe to function, so it can then address the question of why it's not functioning the way it should. To see that approach spelled out in detail, read anything by **John Walton**, e.g.:

- *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*. (Eisenbrauns, 2011)
- *Genesis*. NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2001)
- *The Lost World of Genesis One* (IVP Academic, 2009)
- *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* (IVP Academic, 2015)

Trying to force the Bible to support a particular scientific view has caused serious problems. The best known was the oppression of Galileo in 1633. In 1992, the Catholic Church finally admitted it was wrong and issued an apology. Let's not repeat the mistake.

Taking that approach with people may be enough. It removes any impression that you have to take your brains out to be a Christian.

But if your friends still think that science has disproved the existence of God, it might be worth talking about how we know stuff. Science is one important form of knowledge, but it's not the only one. It doesn't follow that God doesn't exist just because no one can put him in a laboratory to test him.

There are whole disciplines of knowledge that are not based on the scientific method. You cannot "know" anything about history by

testing whether it is repeatable in a laboratory. That doesn’t mean you cannot know anything about history. Historical knowledge is different from scientific knowledge, but it is still valid knowledge. In the same way, relational knowledge (what you know about the people in your world) is not scientific knowledge, yet for most of us it is incredibly important. The knowledge of God, and the knowledge of how God has acted in history cannot be verified scientifically, but they are not thereby invalidated. Science cannot prove or disprove God: you just cannot arrive at knowledge about God through that discipline.

7. Why should I trust the Bible?

People have all sorts of misinformation about the Bible. They read or watch Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* without realising it is fiction. They have all sorts of misunderstandings about how the Bible came to us, so you may need to know some background for the book we trust.

Don’t imagine someone sitting down one day to write a best seller called the Bible. It is actually a collection of 66 different books, written by at least 40 different people, over a period of 1000 years or more (so most of the authors were not contemporaries).

They had no printing presses back then, so each copy of the Bible’s books that survives today was painstakingly copied by hand. People sometimes ask whether its message was altered in transmission.

The reality is that the New Testament documents are far better attested than *anything* else from the ancient world. For example, there are just 10 copies of the document that tells us of Julius Caesar, and the oldest of those is dated 1000 years after he lived. By contrast, we have 24,000 copies or fragments of New Testament books, and the oldest is within living memory of when it was written!

<i>Manuscript Evidence for Ancient Writings</i>				
Author	Written	Earliest Copy	Gap	Manuscripts
Caesar	100-44 BC	900 AD	1,000 yrs	10
Plato	427-347 BC	900 AD	1,200 yrs	7
Thucydides	460-400 BC	900 AD	1,300 yrs	8
Tacitus	100 AD	1100 AD	1,000 yrs	20
Suetonius	75-160 AD	950 AD	800 yrs	8
Homer (<i>Iliad</i>)	900 BC	400 BC	500 yrs	643
New Testament	40-100 AD	125 AD	c. 50 yrs	24,000

No documents have been studied in as much detail as the Bible. No book has sold more copies than the Bible. No book has been translated into as many languages. It is the most life-changing narrative ever. People still discover themselves within God’s story.

8. Jesus is back from the dead?

The resurrection of Jesus is the point at which history changes, the point at which he is shown to be lord of heaven and earth, the point where he begins restoring humanity (implementing his death on the cross). It is the core of our faith (1 Corinthians 15), and the crucial message the apostles preached (Acts 1:21; 2:31f; 3:15; 4:2, 10, 15, 33; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30; 17:18; 23:6; 24:15; 26:8).

Of all the facets of Jesus' story, the resurrection is often the hardest for people to accept. It cuts across everything people know. It's been like that from the beginning. When Paul spoke in Athens, it was the resurrection that became the confrontation point:

Acts 17:32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this."

Read and mediate on the resurrection, e.g.

Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (SPCK, 2007).

Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who empowers our witness to the resurrection, who helps people to "get it." We live Jesus' kingdom life, we pray, and we expect God to open people's eyes and demonstrate the truth of Jesus' reign (1 Corinthians 2:3-5).

Conclusion

These are only a small subset of the questions people will raise as you share your faith.

Christianity is rational (though more than that). There are answers, but none of us have them all. Helping people explore their questions may be of more effective than trying to make your answers fit them.

Genuineness is more effective than genius. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Listening and loving helps win not just the argument but the person.

When we love people, we reflect our Heavenly Father, as co-workers in his mission. We live as servants of King Jesus, announcing in actions and words the great news of liberation from bondage to death and sin and decay, living in the hope of the ultimate restoration of all things, when he fills all in all.

Memory work

John 13:35 (NIV)

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Take home exercise

Meditate on the *Lord's Prayer* throughout the next week.

Take a phrase each day, and ponder what Jesus was asking us to pray for, e.g.:

Tues: Our Father in heaven

Wed: Hallowed by your name

Thu: Your kingdom come

Fri: Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

Sat: Give us this day our daily bread

Sun: Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.

Mon: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

What Jesus *prayed* for and what he *lived* for were congruent. The prayer explains his life, and his life explains the prayer. Mediate on how this worked for Jesus, e.g. consider Jesus' relationship with Father, Jesus living to glorify his name, Jesus' stories of the kingdom, and so on. Then consider how this prayer informs and defines your life.

More than anything else, this prayer summarises Jesus' mission. He gave us the same mission (John 20:21), and so he gave us the same prayer. How does praying this prayer help you understand our mission and clarify what you are living for? Over the next week, pray it a phrase at a time and see.

If you missed any notes or podcasts for *Unit 108—Good news for God's world*, scroll down this page: <https://www.riverviewchurch.com.au/media/courses>