



ANSWERING OBJECTIONS TO THE GOSPEL

ANDY MCCULLOUGH

How can you be so narrow-minded and intolerant to insist that Jesus is the only way to God? How do you know there is a God? How can you believe in “miracles” in a world in which science has explained everything? How can you believe in a “good” God when there is so much evil and suffering in the world? What about people who never hear about Jesus? Will God judge them? Why should I accept what the Bible has to say? What about other religions?

As we communicate the gospel we frequently encounter questions that challenge the validity of our message. Some arise in sincerity from people who are honestly grappling with the implications of our message. A Hindu student wrestles with our message for his deceased grandparents who never heard about Christ. A student still grieving the loss of her mother to cancer has a hard time believing that God is good and that he cares about her.

On the other hand, other questions arise as a smoke-screen to divert the conversation. A student who is uncomfortable with the implications of the gospel message may say, “But what about people who have never heard?” as a way of diverting attention away from his own need for Christ. This reality, of course, complicates our situation. In addition to responding to the actual content question we must also attempt to address the issues underlying the question. We must consider not only what someone asks us but also why they ask it. All of this can leave us feeling ill-equipped and discouraged at times. How are we to proceed?

THREE IMPORTANT PERSPECTIVES

Before we discuss an important skill that can help us in answering these questions there are several important perspectives to keep in mind. First, we

must never forget that God can and will use us regardless of what we know. This is not an excuse for not doing our homework but it is a theological perspective we need to keep in view. Second, there is nothing wrong with saying, “You know, that is a great question. I’ve never thought about that before. Can I think about that and get back to you?”

Most people find that kind of sincerity refreshing. Sometimes we can feel like we need to know the answers to all the big questions before we ever attempt to share our faith. That simply is not true. Learning to answer objections effectively is a process in which we all continue to grow. We never arrive. Finally, we must remember that we are not merely responding to a position but attempting to persuade a person. Winning an argument can never be our goal. Our goal is to lead people toward faith in Christ.

This means that how we conduct ourselves is just as important as what we say. We are wise to follow Paul’s advice to Timothy, “and the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.” (1 Tim. 2:24-26, NIV)

Although the original context for Paul’s advice was probably not evangelistic but rather confronting false teaching in the church, his advice is certainly applicable to evangelism.

A DIALOGICAL APPROACH

With these thoughts in mind there is one important skill we can develop that will help us more effectively



respond to objections to the Christian faith. Let's imagine that you and a student with whom you are sharing the gospel are sitting in the student union. You get to Law 3 and the student says, "How can you be so narrow-minded to insist that Jesus is the only way to God? After all, there are many other religions whose followers seem just as sincere as Christians." How are we to respond to this question?

Normally we feel obliged to present a well-thought through response to this question. If we have studied this question at all, we may launch into an elaborate explanation of why Christianity is the only way to God. We might call this the "question and answer approach." Non-Christians supply questions and we provide the answers. This is the typical approach to most "apologetics." We read books that give us the "answers" to the questions non-Christians ask.

There are several shortcomings to the "question and answer approach." First, this approach immediately puts us on the defensive. Once the non-Christian has raised the objection it is now our responsibility to come up with the "answer." The non-Christian doesn't have to answer or defend anything. There is no reason for us to be put on the defensive. Second, this approach leads to a monologue rather than dialogue. Once the non-Christian has asked the question they sit silently until we've said everything we remember about their question. We want to learn how to respond in a way that leads to further dialogue.

Finally, this approach often does not address the issue underlying the original question-- a question that surfaced their assumptions about authority. One of the most important skills we can develop in responding to objections is learning to ask good questions. We might call this approach "dialogical." It stands in contrast to the "question and answer" approach. What exactly would a dialogical approach look like? Let's return to our example at the beginning of this section. A student with whom you are sharing the gospel says, "How can you be so narrow-minded to insist that Jesus is the only way to God? After all, there are many other religions whose followers seem no less sincere than the average Christian." The key to the dialogical approach is asking them questions and then letting the student respond.

Sample Questions

Here are some sample questions you might ask.

"Tell me, what you do make of all the different

religions?"

Let them respond. They may say that they believe that all religions are valid. Then you might ask,

"You seem to be saying that all religions are true at the same time. How is that possible in light of the fact that these religions make contradictory claims? Islam, for example claims there is one God while Hindus maintain there are many gods."

Let them respond. You might also ask,

"Does the fact that there are many points of view mean that all of them must be right?"

Or, taking a different starting point you might ask,

"Does the fact that something is narrow make it wrong?"

There are many other questions you might ask. The point is that you are having a dialogue. They are being challenged to think and process along the way. There are several benefits to a dialogical approach. First, it keeps us from being on the defensive. Second, a dialogical approach leads to further discussion. It involves the student in the discussion. Finally, this kind of approach helps us get at the underlying issues (intellectual, emotional, etc.) that keep a person from coming to faith in Christ.

RESPONDING TO OBJECTIONS

This is an opportunity for you to do some research to help you more effectively respond to a common objection to the gospel you encounter in evangelism. Work through the following process and then discuss it with your coach.

Step One: Identify an objection you would like to study further. Think through your experiences in evangelism over the last year. What is the most common objection to the gospel you have encountered? You may need to think back to when you were a student. Describe that objection below. (If you are having a hard time identifying an objection to study, ask students or your staff team what some of the common objections are.)

Step Two: Research "answers" to this objection. With help from your coach, find a chapter in a book that addresses this "objection" to the Christian faith.



Take notes as you read and then answer the following questions:

1. Based on your study, what are the most important issues to address in effectively responding to this objection? (For example, if you were dealing with Christianity and other religions, one of the most important issues would be the fact that religions make contradictory claims and cannot all be true at the same time.)
2. What is one change you would like to make in your approach to this “objection” based on your study?
3. What might it look like to take a “dialogical” approach to this objection? Write down at least four questions you might ask a person who raises this objection.

Step Three: Role-play with your one of your co-leaders or a teammate. Have your co-leader or teammate be the non-Christian who asks raises this objection and attempt to respond using a dialogical approach.

Step Four: Evaluation. Discuss with your co-leader or teammate where you need to grow in answering common objections to the gospel in evangelism. How can I learn more? First, look for someone from whom you can learn. Is there someone on your team you’ve observed? We often learn best from models. Second, you might consider reading one of the “Apologetics” books listed in the recommended books section. Keep in mind that while some of these books will help you find “answers” they will not always help you ask better questions. Third, look on the everystudent folder on the CD. There is a word document with links to hard-to-answer questions.