

Asking Questions to Help Unbelievers Find the Truth

One of the biggest challenges when practicing apologetics is to maintain a Christ-like balance of speaking the truth in love. For some, apologetics becomes the hammer by which to bludgeon every contrary notion to the Christian faith, and success is measured in terms of how foolish the opponent and his arguments appear at the end of the debate. For others, apologetics becomes a course in “majoring on the minors.” The Gospel becomes simply one bullet point in the discussion, and so in order to win the argument, they may omit the most important part of Christ’s person and work. Finally for others, apologetics may simply remain in the scholarly and philosophic realm to the neglect of the practical and pastoral realities of Christian ministry.

Written below is a fictional dialogue of apologetics based upon the simple question, “Ask them why?” What I have tried to do is demonstrate the effective use of questions. Also, be sure to pay attention to the importance of dealing with presuppositions, both Christian and non-Christian. Finally, I have concluded with a summary section explaining how this encounter can build a bridge to gospel proclamation.

The Emerging Revisionist

Unbeliever: Nouvil, a 50 year old, disillusioned pastor who has rejected his conservative fundamentalist roots, and embraced the theology of Open Theism, The New Perspective on Paul, pluralism, inclusivism, universalism, and social activism, and labels himself an Emerging Christian.

Believer: Bowden, a 32 year old author of science fiction and fantasy literature with no personal history in the fundamentalist movement. Many of his friends and peers have shown interest in the new emerging church movement and he is concerned about its effect on their belief in Scripture. They both keep their “office” at the local coffee shop.

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Nouvil: Hey Bowden. Are you going to see the Angels and Demons movie when it comes out?

Bowden: I’m not sure. I read the book a couple years ago, but he’s the same guy who wrote the Da Vinci Code, and in that book he blatantly attacked the deity of Christ.

Nouvil: Well, for all the flaws of his books, I think what Dan Brown is trying to do is suggest that the dominant religious institutions have created their own version of Jesus. And I think that people deep down know that this is true and the Religious Right have made the words “Jesus” and “Christianity” associated with hostile, hypocritical, judgmental, negative, angry, defensive, anti-homosexual, hellfire and brimstone people who are upholding something that is distorted and fake.

Bowden: Do you think negatives or defenses are a bad thing?

Nouvil: Yes, take for example the doctrine of Hell and final judgment. The idea that God holds us over the pit of hell, like someone holds a spider or loathsome insect gives us a view of God as someone who suffers from borderline personality disorder or even something worse. A gospel that says God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, and if you don’t love God and cooperate with His plans in specific prescribed ways, God will torture you with unimaginable abuse forever is no good news at all. Any child who had a parent act that way would live in a dysfunctional family. This is not God as

He really is; instead it is God as modern Christians have painted Him. For the ancient prophets, judgment didn't mean that people would be thrown into hell. Rather, it meant that their evil would be exposed and named, and they would suffer consequences of their evil in history, in this life.

Bowden: How do you know that is the Bible's teaching on hell?

Nouvil: I don't know for sure. It is not like I am able to have truth captured, stuffed and mounted on the wall. I am seeking the truth on the road of mission and I have been launched on this quest by Jesus who guides me still. This is simply a way of looking and seeking, a way of living, a way of thinking and learning and loving that helps what I believe become more true over time. Over time, what I believe will become more resonant with the infinite glory that is God.

Bowden: How can something become more true over time? I mean, you quickly agree that the Bible teaches the truth that Jesus is loving and compassionate, but you want to reject anything as absolutely true if you disagree with it. In your mind, we can't know the doctrine of hell, we can only have opinions or thoughts on it, but this is illogical. Something is either true or false; it cannot be more true or more false. The Bible clearly teaches that God is holy and His holiness demands justice for our sins. He can't simply sweep them under the rug, but His compassion and mercy met His righteousness and holiness at the cross when Jesus Christ died in the place of sinners. I deserved punishment in Hell and He delivered me from the consequences by putting all my sin on Christ and judging Him in my place.

Nouvil: The idea of a penal substitutionary sacrifice is nothing more than cosmic child abuse. In believing this we have retained Jesus as Savior but promoted the Apostle Paul

to Lord and Teacher. All of that idea of Jesus as a substitute to rescue us from eternal punishment is a misunderstanding and misuse of Paul in a way that pits us against Jesus.

Bowden: How do you know?

Nouvil: Because this view of Jesus comes from popular modernist theology. We need to find ways to radically rethink our image of Jesus outside of our modernist trappings and emerge from the rationalistic, propositional statements of fundamentalist, modernist theologians who tried to distill everything in a test tube. We need to reclaim the Bible as narrative rather than didactic in nature.

Bowden: Why?

Nouvil: Even Paul is closer to Jesus in this regard than many people realize. Take the book of Romans, for example, where Paul writes his story less as a linear argument and more as a rapid-fire succession of parable-like analogies, images, narratives, and imaginary conversations. He paints pictures of marriages and divorces, slaves and masters, bodies and body parts, pots and potters, along with a number of stories from Adam to Abraham. Paul shows that he is less like a lawyer making arguments and more the poet making parables.

Bowden: You are making truth-claims about what Scripture says, about its purpose, about what it demands, and about how we should live. So then, even with your insistence on Scripture as narrative over and against propositional truth is a truth claim in and of itself. A proposition, by definition, is a premise that is either true or false. There is no third choice. You cannot even tell stories without propositions. For example, if I write a novel about a main character that is an elven woman in her mid-thirties, I have made many propositions in order to tell my story. I have said she is elven, which would have to

be defined according to the world I have created. I have said she is a woman. This means, unless I explain some radical change in her makeup, she is not going to be a man later in the narrative. I have also said that she is in her mid-thirties. Once again, she cannot be in her mid-thirties and in her mid-eighties at the same time. If you are so serious about getting rid of propositions, you will also have to forfeit narrative theology. And if you forfeit both propositional truth and narrative theology, why should I live out your tradition?

Nouvil: But this isn't the same thing. Just because I understand the difference between a man and a woman in your novel, does not mean that the doctrine of Hell is understood the same way. As you well know, there are other uses of language, like metaphor and imagery.

Bowden: Nouvil, I think you are interpreting Scripture based on your presuppositions. You have already told me that the bible does not teach in propositional truth, but rather in parables. You are using propositional truths to defend your position.

Nouvil: But I don't have a propositional position, I am simply on a spiritual journey.

Bowden: You do have a propositional position. By denying the historic teaching on the doctrine of Hell, for example, you are propositionally saying that conscious torment forever in a real place called Hell is not true. So even in rejecting the rationalism of modernist thinking, you are using rational arguments. This is because the laws of logic and reason were not invented in the modern period; they are a reflection of the mind of God. They are outside of any cultural philosophy or worldview. They are from a biblical worldview, so therefore when we read Scripture; we must apply logic and reason. If you want to be more resonant with the glory of God, you should go back to the text and

humbly submit to what it teaches rather than suppressing the truth. If you want to have true knowledge of God, you must begin by accepting God as He says He is, not making Him into something you want Him to be. Your humility is in the wrong place. Your modesty is on the organ of conviction rather than on the organ of ambition. God means for us to be doubtful about ourselves, but undoubting about the truth. It is not a matter of choosing experience over truth. That is like choosing the front wheel of the motorcycle over the rear wheel or choosing love over honesty, faith over obedience. It is a false antithesis similar to the question, “Did you drive or bring your lunch?” Jesus Christ is Lord over our experience and Lord over the truth.

Summary of Bowden and Nouvil

At first, Nouvil’s arguments seem very intimidating. They are very elaborate and sound convincing to the ears of people who are bathed in postmodern culture. He rejected the clear teaching of Scripture, reinterprets even the nature of how we can understand Scripture, and appeals to emotions and experience as the ultimate authority. In redefining the Bible the way he wanted, Nouvil was actually making a god of his own imagining. He did not want to submit to the God of the Bible, and he rejected any idea of the character of God requiring a substitute for sinners. This revealed that he completely understood the core message of the Gospel. There are many people today who are disillusioned with a legalistic brand of Christianity. In their legitimate questioning of man-made doctrine, they begin to question God-given doctrine as well.

Bowden patiently attempted to show Nouvil that even the postmodern “Christian” who despises absolute truth fails to escape the way God created him. The very nature of reality in which we live forces us to use logic everyday. Bowden attempted to show this

to Nouvil by using the example of language in a book. Bowden attempted to show Nouvil that laws of logic and reason are not a result of a modernist worldview but are a reflection of the very mind of God.

In the emerging church there are a number of questions being asked, some of them legitimate, some of them good, and some of them awful. This is not a bad thing. For many people that have been engrossed in man-made rules and regulations (like many in the emerging movement), it is good to ask the question, “What does the Bible say?” However, when someone rejects what the Bible clearly teaches because it doesn’t appeal to their sense of fairness or they simply don’t like it, they are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18ff). The Bible insists that we should take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

As an opening for the Gospel, it would be important for Bowden to continue to dialogue with Nouvil regarding the substitutionary nature of Christ’s work at the cross. It would be tempting for Bowden to get off track, for example, by arguing about the nature of the book of Romans. Instead, Bowden should trace the gospel through the narrative of Scripture from Gen. 3:15 to Jesus Christ, and might want to land on Isaiah 53 and talk about the substitutionary work of the Suffering Servant, who is this same Jesus.

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This quarter we are going to study the theology and practice of apologetics, and in doing so, I hope that we will remain true to both the mission of Christ to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom and the character of Christ in speaking the truth in love. Please join us.