

An interview with Randy Newman, Author of *Questioning Evangelism*



When it comes to evangelism, do you feel pressured to know all the answers? What if you didn't have to worry about having all the right answers but instead knew the right questions to ask in return? In *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did* (Second Edition) (Kregel Publications), author Randy Newman asks readers to look at evangelism in a different way. After all, Jesus asked questions; why don't we?

Q: The title of your book by itself may have people wondering if you have doubts about the need of telling others about Jesus, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Tell us a little bit about *Questioning Evangelism*.

It could seem I'm doubting whether we need to evangelize, but I'm not. I am questioning the way we have been doing evangelism for the past 50 years or so. Our world has changed so dramatically that we need new methods to proclaim the timeless message of the gospel. Our message hasn't changed, but our methods must change. Just thinking about how Jesus spoke to different people in different ways makes me want to find ways to adapt my approaches to different people. Asking questions can be a good starting point for interacting with a wide range of individuals.

Q: The first edition of *Questioning Evangelism* has been a perennial best-seller since its release more than a decade ago. What has been updated in this second edition?

The biggest change had to be made because of how our culture has moved strongly in favor of homosexuality. Fourteen years ago I wrote a chapter on how we witness to homosexuals, and some people may have thought that was odd. Back then, few people brought up the issue of homosexuality in the context of an evangelistic conversation. Today, however, people raise the question often, and it's absolutely essential to address it. I updated the chapter extensively and suggested some helpful resources developed in the past few years.

Q: There has always been opposition to proclaiming the Gospel, but in what ways is it more challenging for Christians to share their faith in today's world?

In the past, I think, most of the objections were intellectual. People posed content-driven questions such as, "What evidence is there for the existence of God?" or "Doesn't the Bible contradict itself?" Today the questions are more emotionally-driven, and a fair amount of animosity is behind the objections. People attack more than ask. The questioning accusations may include, "How can Christians be so intolerant in our diverse world?" or "Why are you the only ones who are still homophobic?"

Q: What are the most common excuses Christians use for not sharing their faith?

Fear is probably the biggest obstacle, and I don't think it's just an excuse. It's a real problem that can't simply be overcome by pushing aside excuses. We need gospel transformation inside us, the ones doing the evangelizing, so we care more about God's glory than about what people think of us. This is not as simple or automatic as we sometimes say it is. Another obstacle is feeling unprepared. We're concerned people might ask us a question we haven't researched enough to prepare an answer. We do need to do some preparation, but we also need to rely on God as He works alongside us as we proclaim the good news.

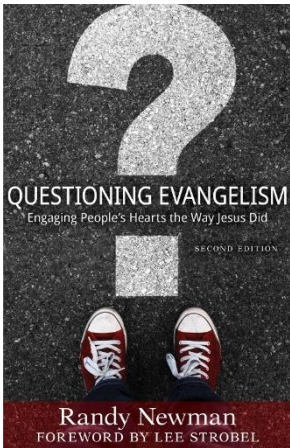
Q: Why is it better to ask questions than to give answers when it comes to evangelism? What are some of the first questions you use to get a conversation started?

What does a question do that an answer doesn't? (Yes, I know. I just answered your question with a question on purpose.) Doesn't a question make you think and participate in the answering process? Doesn't a question sometimes expose hidden or less-than-sincere motives? Don't questions take away some of the anger?

The easiest first questions are ones that clarify. "What do you mean by . . . ?," "Are you saying . . . ?," or "Why, of all the possible questions you could ask, do you ask that question?" Of course, sooner or later, you have to do more than just ask questions. At some point, the questioning gets annoying, but some carefully chosen questions can pave the way for more productive conversations than just announcing an answer.

Q: Tell us about how you came to start using this method in your own outreach.

It was born out of frustration. Just answering questions wasn't working. I needed to try engaging with people instead of just preaching at them. I saw enough success to keep going, develop the technique and experiment with new questions. It also prompted me to study how Jesus used questions and answered questions with questions. If He used this technique, I figured it was a better model than the ones we often look to for insights about evangelism. The most common approach I had seen was taken more from the business world than the Bible. We approached evangelism the way sales people approached their trade. The gospel is not a product, and evangelism is not a sales pitch.



Q: Many times we get frustrated when someone answers a question with a question. How can we use the questioning method in a way that doesn't turn off the person we are talking to?

A lot of it has to start from within. We need genuine concern for people, not just insight in how to win arguments. Praying and asking God to give us love for people is essential. It's not automatic or something we can well up from within us. We need wisdom from God about how to engage with people as whole persons — intellectually, emotionally and socially.

Q: How should a reader approach and use *Questioning Evangelism*?

Ideally I would hope people would read it in a small group and discuss it chapter by chapter. In particular, I think it would be most helpful if people could discuss how they could formulate questions to try out on non-Christians they know. In fact, I hope readers will discuss it over the course of a few months while trying out some of the approaches from the book in real-life conversations between meetings. As people share successes, failures and frustrations, they can brainstorm ways to improve and pray for God to bless their efforts.

Q: What are the most difficult questions Christians need to be able to answer or at least have a response to? How can they prepare to respond to those questions?

The three biggest questions, in my opinion, are the ones about exclusivity (Why do you think Jesus is the only way?), suffering (How can you believe in a God who allows so much evil in the world?) and sexuality (Why are Christians stuck in the 18th century?). Without repeating everything I wrote in the book, I think the single best approach to preparing is to become fluent with such phrases as, "I don't have a simple answer to your question, but I would like to discuss it. Would you?"

Q: Sometimes discussions about Christianity start as conversations that don't seem directly tied to faith. What are some of the other topics you explore in *Questioning Evangelism*?

I think we can get to discussions of faith from a wide range of starting points. If people want to talk about events in the world that point to something supernatural, we can explore those with them. In fact, the word "explore" is a good one for how we might move from any topic to God, the afterlife, moral issues or what people value most. I think being a good listener can move many conversations from idle or shallow chit-chat to discussions of everlasting value. Things can happen in the course of a conversation that can't happen just by conveying information or handing someone a booklet to read.

Q: What are the three skills required for any evangelistic approach? What are some ways to help build those skills?

The first and most basic skill involves declaring the gospel, including the ability to articulate the message of salvation clearly and concisely. A tool such as Bill Bright's "The Four Spiritual Laws" is helpful in presenting the message clearly while avoiding unnecessary distractions or confusing rabbit trails. Declaring the gospel also includes the sharing of one's own story or testimony. Each Christian needs fluency in articulating how the Lord changed his or her life and the difference that change makes daily.

The second evangelistic skill is defending the gospel. Anticipating common questions, acquainting oneself with helpful discoveries from the past and planning how to deliver this information in a logical sequence has to be part of "always being ready to make a defense" (1 Peter 3:15 NASB).

The third skill — and this is where *Questioning Evangelism* fits in — is built upon the foundations of declaring and defending the gospel. That skill is called dialoguing the gospel. Often neglected, difficult to master, but absolutely essential, this skill of giving and taking — asking questions and bouncing ideas back and forth — might be just what our postmodern audience needs. We need all three skills if we're to be Christ's ambassadors in the 21st century.

Building any of these skills simply involves practice, which in turns builds confidence. I don't want people to respond to my examples by saying, "I've got to memorize this so the next time someone asks me that question, I'll say these words, use these phrases, ask these questions," and so forth. Instead I hope readers will develop a different way of thinking about people, their questions and our message. Because of that difference, our evangelistic conversations will sound less content/persuasion-driven and more relationship/understanding-driven.

Q: What encouragement do you offer to someone who doesn't believe he or she has the skills and knowledge to carry on an evangelistic conversation?

A concise two-part answer is: 1) None of us are adequate, and 2) we're not in the process alone. A more elaborate answer would be we can improve with practice and trust God is at work in and through us in ways we can't even imagine. When we begin an evangelistic conversation we should ask God for wisdom about what to say and how to say it, but we should also ask Him to work so that, even if we say really foolish, wrong or inaccurate things, He can work in spite of our less-than-stellar efforts.

Learn more about *Questioning Evangelism* at www.connectionpoints.us. Randy Newman is also on [Twitter \(@RandyDNewman\)](https://twitter.com/RandyDNewman).