

Question Panel Helps

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

[John 1 verse 14]

- Keep the Bible right at the forefront. Your own experience is great, but if the Bible has something to say about the issue (and it always does), then make that your starting point. You're not judging anyone by teaching the Bible, you're just telling them what God says, which is more likely to change lives than what you say, however great that is. By all means tell your story, but try to keep that secondary to the Bible.
- We speak the TRUTH! Don't try and hide what the Bible says even if we fear people may not like it. But there are two huge dangers in speaking the truth we can fall into, as we look at really difficult issues. First, we can be overly simplistic, so we say, 'One line answer! Next question?' which leaves young people thinking (but not saying), 'But what about..?' Second, we can try to tie up everything, which doesn't normally work because we're not God, these are tough questions and we will talk forever! The third approach which I'd advocate is saying what we can be sure of in the Bible (speaking the truth), not guessing what we can't, and offering those thoughts in a gracious and gentle way (Colossians 4 v.6).
- If it's a secular setting, use appropriate language for that context i.e. 'Jesus said...', 'the Bible says...', 'Christians believe...'. Think carefully about using 'I believe...'. Only use 'I believe...' when there isn't a stronger phrase to use. 'Jesus says...' or 'The Bible says...' are stronger and put the emphasis and the argument where they should be. 'The Bible says this. Some Christians think this, but I believe this...' is the right place to use 'I believe...'
- Whilst saying what we believe, if appropriate talk about the range of Christian beliefs. So, we may believe God created the world in six days, but do say that other Christians don't agree, believe God took millions of years over it, but they are still Christians. Don't make people think that something that's not a salvation issue stops them being able to become a Christian.
- We are full of GRACE! Think of the woman caught in adultery and Jesus' reaction to her. If we forget everything else, we need to remember **GRACE, GRACE, GRACE**. People are expecting Christians to be arrogant and judgemental. Surprise them (1 Peter 2.12). Jesus was very sensitive and gentle to those outside the faith about how they were living, and very challenging to church leaders. A great story to get out in the question panel is the story of the thief on the cross (Luke 23 v.32-43) or the woman caught in adultery (John 8.1-11), because they sum up the grace of God so well and surprise people. If Jesus' grace is big enough for the thief (for 'thief' read 'murderer or terrorist'), it's big enough for them and it gets away from the thought that good people go to heaven and bad people don't.
- Listen carefully to the actual question, then aim to answer it. If the last answerer drifted away from it, then try to come back to it. Use the words that the questioner uses, so if they say, 'Why did God allow Covid-19?' then don't answer, 'Why does God allow suffering?' but 'Why did God allow Covid-19?' Try not to say, 'Before I answer that question...' or 'Can I just say...', just answer the question, otherwise it seems like you're avoiding it.

- Remember the question behind the question. Answer it if you can spot it, but remember that when someone says, ‘Do people who aren’t Christians go to hell?’ they may be really asking, ‘What happened to my dad who died last month?’
- Try to avoid the title ‘non-Christian’. It sounds confrontational.
- One-word answers are allowed. The host should point you towards those, but feel free to say, ‘yes’ or ‘no’ if the question calls for it. Some questions will need more explanation, but some are simple - don’t make them harder - but keep time free for those which demand more time.
- If we haven’t got anything helpful to say, we can let someone else answer it. Everyone doesn’t need to input into every answer. Also, we don’t feel have to fully answer every question. We can answer a bit, then let someone else speak. **Work as a team.** If someone else is speaking, we’re not ‘off the hook’! Think of Bible stories that back up, or examples of our own experience that backs them up.
- We can disagree gently with other members of the panel. If someone says, ‘That is a stupid question’ (but please don’t), someone else should be saying something like, ‘I don’t think it’s a stupid question at all, because I have the same question myself.’
- Don’t focus on the weird. You may have heard about someone who heard from someone else about meeting an angel while on the toilet in El Salvador in 1996. It might have even happened. But if people think our faith relies on that!???
- It’s OK to admit when we struggle with things (Phew! That means normal people can become Christians!), if it is appropriate. Still point people towards our certainties too. ‘I don’t get this, I don’t get that, but I know that Jesus is my saviour and friend and I hang on to that when I struggle with these things...’
- Tell stories (including Bible stories - many people won’t know them) as much as possible. People engage with stories e.g. a rescue helicopter to explain faith. And nobody can disagree with your story - it is YOUR story!
- **Share the gospel. This is what is at the heart of our belief.** It is interesting to talk about what colour we should wear in what season, BUT no one will be moved on in their journey through that. **Try to talk as much as possible about Jesus’ life, his death and resurrection, salvation, eternal life, our transformation...**
- And pray, pray, pray beforehand, during the panel and afterwards (Philippians 4 v.6-7). Pray for the Spirit to work, pray for insights, pray for linked stories, pray for wisdom as people are talking.
- And lastly, make eye contact and smile! When we’re not talking, lean back, keep listening, look at the person answering the question, smile and nod (but only if you agree with them, see ‘We can disagree gently’ above!).

Some specific questions:

- Suffering - think in terms of a jigsaw. We can put some pieces in, but we don’t see the whole picture, but some things help:

- Adam and Eve - so God made the world perfect, now whole world is under curse (c.f. natural disasters)
 - God loves & understands - he suffered as a man Jesus (who cried when his friend Lazarus died) and died on a cross.
 - If God was to put an end to suffering, would he have to put an end to us? I've certainly caused suffering before, have you?
 - God is with us in our suffering. He is not a distant God c.f. 'Immanuel which means God with us' and the Holy Spirit. Not only is he with us, but he also cares.
 - There will be an end to suffering - Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven... One day we will join him there.
- Contradictions - This question is often phrased something like this, 'Why are there so many contradictions in the Bible?' We shoot ourselves in the foot for later questions, if we hint that writers may have got it wrong... Better to ask for specific examples and tackle them one by one, although that will take time... I would often ask a question back: 'Name two...' Most people bail out at one! I'm not saying there aren't two supposed contradictions in the Bible, but there really aren't as many as the question would imply. I'd focus on the one that nearly everyone says, 'In the Old Testament, it says, 'An eye for an eye...' and Jesus says, 'You have heard it was said... but I tell you, 'Do not resist the one who is evil...' The key point is context. The Old Testament quote is about the judicial law in society - and is about not demanding too much for a small crime. The punishment should fit the crime. The second is about personal law - how I treat someone who has harmed me. Jesus is separating judicial law from how we react to evildoers personally - we love our enemy. Think about it like this, if someone killed someone dear to us, it's right that they are punished in court. Still, we can respond with love and forgiveness.
 - Why does God change between the Old and New Testament? Note the presupposition here... Think about God clothing the ashamed Adam and Eve, God rescuing Noah, God calling Abram, God rescuing his unfaithful people from slavery in Egypt (they were worshipping other gods...) or in the time of Judges and you'll realise God is incredibly gracious in the Old Testament. Then think about Jesus telling the story of the rich man and Lazarus, or his words to those asking him about the Tower of Siloam, or the sheep and the goats, and you'll realise Jesus is powerful and judging too. And that's before you get on to Revelation... Remember the Lake of Fire. God is always a holy Judge. He's always a gracious and loving Saviour. He's not one or the other. He's not half of each. He's both. Don't fear complexity. **God is complex, and good.**
 - Science and Christianity. It's helpful to remind ourselves of the names of scientists who were/are Christians - people like Francis Collins who led the Human Genome Project in the US and wrote *'The Language of God: A scientist presents evidence for belief'*, Galileo, Pascal, Boyle, Faraday, Babbage, Lister and Marconi, and there are hundreds more. The two then cannot be in conflict. The thought that science and Christianity can't co-exist is quite a recent thought.
 - **God will use you on this panel, despite all the things you don't know the answer to. Keep pointing people to him!**