



WAY OF LIFE

A PATTERN FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

Answering Tough Questions

Christian Apologetics

Journeying OUT

... sharing the love of God with others in both deeds and words



DIOCESE OF TRURO
DISCOVERING GOD'S KINGDOM
GROWING THE CHURCH

Answering Tough Questions

How to use this material.

The materials in this course could be used by individuals, in homegroups or as a Parish course - either on its own or as a part of the “Sharing our Faith” course which is also available on the Diocesan website.

This resource consists of an introductory session which looks at some of the principles of how to respond to tough questions we may be asked. The following sessions can then be used to explore particular questions in depth, or the questions could be individually attached to each week of the course on “Sharing our faith”. In this way the material is flexible. The local leader will need to decide which sections are most appropriate for their context, or group participants might like to vote on which subjects to explore and in which order.

Each session should last between an hour and an hour and a half, depending on your group or method of study.

Please feel free to contact Angela Butler if you would like to talk through the use of the material or seek advice on different ways to approach each session. Similarly we would be pleased to hear about any further ideas that you think should be added to the material or things that could be done to improve it.

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An Introduction to Apologetics

In the history of Christian theology, this means the defence, by argument, of Christian belief against external criticism or against other world views. Such argument usually takes the critics' questions or the problems posed by the philosophy and culture of the age as its starting point, and looks for some *common ground* or shared criteria of rationality or morality, in terms of which to build up the case of Christianity against objections.

Tackling those awkward questions or topics.

As we talk to others, whether that be in general conversation, or specifically about Christianity or the Church, there are bound to be topics that we lack confidence in talking about.

Realistically we cannot expect to have answers to everything people might want to talk about but we can make helpful contributions to help them to take another step in their journey of faith.

1. Engaging people in conversation about difficult questions

Attitudes

Even before we start to think about how we might talk to people about their questions or objections it's important to register how we feel about what some might think of as "defending" our faith. People will quickly pick up whether we are defensive, aggressive, too confident, evasive or whether we are genuinely interested in helping them to explore faith issues without putting them down or rubbishing their views.

The evidence is that the majority of people come to faith through friends and family so friendship will be all important in the relationships we make with people we talk to about faith issues.

Exercise 1

Share in pairs and then in the group how you feel in situations when people express views about Christianity or the Church which you want to then talk to them about.

Language and approach

How do you, or might you, start to respond in a typical situation?

Would any of the following be your typical response or reaction?

- a) Sorry, I don't agree with that....

- b) That’s nonsense
- c) What do you mean by.....?
- d) Where did you get that information?
- e) What makes you think/say that?
- f) You’re right but....
- g) That’s really interesting, tell me more about why you think that....?
- h) The other side of that is.....
- i) Well, Mrs xxx is.....!
- j) I’m sorry you feel that way about

Share other helpful or unhelpful “starting” comments from your experiences.

What are we “defending”?

It’s important to register at the outset that we are defending the faith, not any failures of the Church or its members. If we come across the latter, the best way forward is to simply apologise rather than get into gossip or conversations about the rights or wrongs of a particular situation or person. Our aim is to get people to look (or look again) at Jesus who is the ultimate healer, Saviour and inspiration for our lives.

2. Looking at common questions:

This section could be run as a “stand-alone” part of the course or woven throughout the other sessions in the way that “Lost for Words” (CPAS) envisages by taking one topic at the end of other training sessions.

Exercise 2

So what questions do you dread being asked?

What views against Christianity or God do you lack confidence in talking about?

Let’s make our own lists first.

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Now ask the group to prioritise the ones they'd like to work through.

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If tackling them each week, aim to take one (or more) of these questions in each of the training sessions so that during the course of the programme you have worked through all of them.

Exercise 3

The process:

On the following pages are examples of how you might approach or tackle questions or objections people have.

The first example shows how we can get alongside people starting with the question “WWJD” - i.e. What would Jesus do/say and then goes on to give an example of this approach using the subject of suffering?

The second example shows how question, some of which are taken from the CPAS course “Lost for words”, follow a pattern of looking at issues, exploration and experience.

Have a go at looking at a couple of these examples using the two different methods to see which one you find most helpful or to see what mix of both could be used.

But first:

Even before we get into the detail of a conversation or discussion there are things it is useful to be alert for:

- a) What is the REAL question or problem the enquirer has? As we try to follow Jesus' example we notice that his expertise was in coming alongside people and addressing their REAL needs. That wasn't always the same thing as the thing they were asking for or what they were saying.

All too often, the first thing people come up with isn't always the REAL question or problem they have.

Remembering that good evangelism starts with listening, it's a good idea to ask them to elaborate on whatever point or subject they are talking about so that you can get a feel for what they are *really* saying. That way we talk with them rather than AT them.

- b) Can you identify where the **common ground** is between what they are saying and where or how Christianity could contribute to the discussion?
- c) Having tried to work out what is their REAL problem or objection we can then prayerfully work through some of their difficult questions using a sort of methodology to make sure that we cover as many as possible angles.

3. An approach to tackling an issue:

- i) Can you think of something that Jesus would have said or done about this subject or situation or some basic principle that the Bible teaches us about God?
- ii) Wherever possible quote Jesus or passages from the Bible without seeming to be "pushy" or over religious.
- iii) Can you think of anything that the Church in its development of theology or doctrine has to say on this subject?
- iv) Apply common sense! Are there things that can naturally contribute to this discussion from research, science, life in general?

- v) On moral or ethical questions - what is the most loving thing to do in this or that situation. Is there a balance to be struck between the “greater good” and the “lesser evil”?
- vi) Be aware of what other reading or literature might be available to help someone work through a particular question or problem. Offer it, or the opportunity to talk to someone else, to the person.
- vii) Check whether what you have talked about has been helpful. Are there other things the person would like to talk about? Would they be interested in joining a group to explore such questions?

4. A second approach to tackling an issue

This approach is used in the CPAS materials.

a) Issues

What people often believe. This lists commonly held views or beliefs that people have about the question. Of course there are many views that won't be listed, but these are the ones that are most commonplace. In the common questions exercise, these are the things that need to be subtly introduced into the dialogue by the person who is playing the part of a 'not yet Christian' interested in this issue.

b) Exploration

A way of exploring some of the insights Christians have on this issue/question.

c) Experience

This section suggests ways to speak more personally from your own experience about this question. Personal testimony is very powerful, as long as it:

- doesn't imply that your story must be their story
- helps people discover the good news about Jesus
- glorifies God.

d) Ideas for further reading Suggested resources to explore the issue further.

5. Final Key Points

- Be honest - if you don't know the answer. You can still refer someone to another person or you can offer to talk again when you have had time to think about it.

- Be careful - to address their REAL questions and not veer off into other areas that they may not be interested in or which might lead them into other areas of discussion which may be unhelpful.
- Be positive - you might not have all the answers or be able to fully convince them at the first opportunity but you can affirm in them the things you agree with or have in common and you can offer to continue the conversation at some point in the future. Always try to end on a positive note - “that was really interesting, I’d love to talk to you again about it some other time”.
- Be personal - speak about your own experiences of God and particularly Jesus. Give examples of how your faith has helped you with the questions and struggles of life.
- Be pro-active - why not make a date to do just that if it seems appropriate. A cup of coffee, a home visit, whatever fits with their normal pattern of living. Invite them to.... a course, a Church event etc.

6. Other ideas

Don’t feel you are on your own when you come across questions or comments that are difficult to answer. Sometimes it’s good to plan for a programme of local events to which people can bring their questions and air them openly.

For instance:

An “any questions” evening in a pub, “Grill the Vicar (or Bishop!)” BBQ , Home coffee morning for neighbours with an opportunity to ask questions and hear a testimony.

Your ideas:

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.....

7. Where do we go from here?

This final part of Session 1 looks at some of the common tough questions you might be faced with. You will then need to agree which questions you would like to explore and how/when you will do that.

Examples of common tough questions; how some of them might be talked about.

Here are some of the common questions you might be faced with when sharing your faith. The following sections pick some, but not all, of these and make some suggestions as to how you might start to answer them. Where examples are not provided you might like to work on them together in your group or Parish using some of the guidelines in Session 1 to tackle the subject.

1. How can we believe in a God of love when there is so much suffering in the world?
2. Don't all religions lead to God?
3. Science and Christianity
4. Church is boring
5. Christians are not a good example
6. My religion/faith is a mixture of things that I think are true
7. You can't believe everything you read in the Bible - it's full of contradictions
8. I don't need to go to Church to be a Christian

A worked example of tackling a 'tough question' using the first method

How can we believe in a God of love when there is so much suffering in the world?

(See also the CPAS handout on this subject):

- Is this the real question? - listening first.

What personal experience of suffering have they got? Themselves, family, friends?

How did/does it affect them or the person involved?

What in particular have they found difficult about it?

- There's no easy answers to this one but can any of these help in any way?

It's interesting that the picture that the Bible gives us is one of a perfect world which we have messed up. We've done it "our way", rather than "God's way" and the result has more often than not been that we've not achieved the perfect world that God intended for us.

Jesus was concerned to bring wholeness and healing to the people he met if they would come to him - or even if their family or friends brought them to him.

That can lead us to ask how much of the suffering in the world is the fault of humankind?

For instance:

- We do things to our environment and don't really understand - or sometimes care about - the effect that is having upon climate, health, the balance of nature.
- We can abuse our bodies by the way we live. Eat too much, smoke, drink, drugs, insufficient exercise etc.
- We can cause ourselves and other people to suffer through our behaviour resulting in arguments, family breakdown, mental breakdown, wars, .etc.
- We can fail to care enough about other people we could help which sometimes results in them being without food, medicines, health care, work etc.
- What did Jesus have to say on the subject?

It's clear that Jesus thought it was important the people were healed but he didn't always heal people of the things that they came to him for. Sometimes ("your sins are forgiven") there were other things they needed to sort out or be healed of before the physical healing was possible. Sometimes he asked them to do certain things before their healing was complete.

- What has been your personal experience?

How has God helped you in times of suffering?

What might God have taught you through times of suffering?

How do you cope with the unanswered questions or prayers?

Resource Sheets

(Our thanks to CPAS for permission to use these Hand out summaries).

The CPAS Course, "Lost for Words" provides hand outs on the following questions, a synopsis of which are included below.

1. Who am I?
2. What is the meaning of life?
3. How do I cope with this sense of being alone?
4. What happens when I die?

5. Is there anyone out there?
6. Do all roads lead to God?
7. Hasn't science disproved Christianity?
8. Why does God allow suffering?
9. Aren't all good people Christians?
10. Why Jesus and not any other religious leader?
11. Are the New Testament documents reliable?

1: Who am I?

Issues

Common views include:

- Deep confusion about identity.
- Concern about whether we are merely numbers to be manipulated by institutions.
- Am I just a combination of chemicals in suspension?
- Am I simply worthless?

Exploration

Some argue we are just a bunch of chemicals, determined by our genes. But who is the 'I' who has made this shattering discovery? What is the force of this argument? Is it supposed to have truth value? For surely it too is totally determined. There can be no truth for the determinist, it is just how things are, leaving us with meaninglessness.

Many people feel worthless because they feel that no one cares for them as people, only as objects, or projects.

If we want to know who we are we have to start at the beginning. Genesis gives us the account of the start, and begins by telling us about God who made us and that we are made in his image. So if we want to know who we are, the answer is to be found in the nature of God, in whose image we are made.

God is personal; he is love, he is relational in his very being (Trinity) and he wanted to lavish his love on others. He made us to be in relationship with himself. The mere fact that he made us makes us special, valuable. Our worth and value is not dependent on what we do, but on the one who made us. Just as when a couple decide to have a child and 'make' that child they do so to lavish love, care and attention on the child, to share the brilliance and beauty of life. When the child is born, they don't love the child because of anything the child has done, but because of who the child is. So too God loves us, longs for the best for us, longs to lead us through life.

Who am I? I am a dearly loved child of God. However, we have the opportunity to turn our back on God's love for us (just as a child does with his parents). When we do that we cut ourselves loose from the moorings that anchor our sense of identity, meaning, purpose and belonging. That is why so many people don't know who they are or why they are here.

God hasn't given up on us, and constantly calls us to return to him. This is most clearly demonstrated in Jesus, who not only comes to show us what God is like, but also to rescue us from the consequences of turning our backs on God. Knowing how God values us, and gives us a correct sense of identity, makes a difference to how I see myself (my self-esteem) and how I treat people.

Much of the above explanation depends on believing in God and taking the account of the origins of humankind seriously. You may well have to argue for these by using the outline for 'Is there anyone out there?'

Experience

Speak about your understanding of your own identity. What makes you feel special/valuable? How has becoming/being a Christian influenced your sense of identity?

For further reading

Michael Green, *Critical Choices*, IVP.

2: What is the meaning of life?

Issues

- Life is an accident.
- We make our own meaning.
- There is no meaning.
- Somehow everything is controlled by fate, or the stars, or some unknowable force, so resign yourself to your destiny.
- Some find meaning in acquiring wealth/possessions, sporting achievement, sexual relationship(s), family, career, power, hobby.
- The purpose of life is to enjoy yourself and get as much pleasure as you can.
- Some questions have no answer - best not dwell on it!

Exploration

Reductionists believe you can 'reduce' everything down to a basic minimum. This philosophy often brings a sense of despair and purposelessness. Here are some ways to explore the issues behind it.

- It has a false premise. Saying x is explained by y is not the same as saying x is nothing but y. For example - the brain. Some people say, 'The mind is nothing but neurones firing.' They are reducing the brain to a chemical reaction. The error is in the words 'nothing but'. The brain is neurones firing, but it is also a lot more.
- Another example is a kiss. To describe a kiss as the coming together of two people's protruding labia for the mutual exchange of saliva and bacteria is strictly accurate, but can never fully describe what a kiss is because it is so much more.
- Reductionism is poor science - it doesn't work. Fatalists believe it is all governed by some force, or fate. There is no choice, so why bother worrying.
- This reduces us to either machines with no choice, or puppets manipulated by an unknown hand.
- It doesn't easily explain why people are prepared to go against their human instinct for survival and lay their lives down for others, for example in acts of heroism.

Consumerists try to find meaning by what they acquire, others by what they achieve. Most material things are here today and gone tomorrow. Even relationships can be devastated by the separation of death.

- Even those who have everything life has to offer still feel empty within. This has often been described as the God-shaped hole. Nothing will fit it perfectly except the one for whom it was designed. There is an alternative. God has a plan for our lives (Ephesians 1:11).
- If the universe was made by a personal, purposeful being, it would be no surprise that his creation is also personal and has a purpose.
- God made us for a purpose, to know him and to serve him.
- Life's meaning is found in relationship with him. He calls those who know him to make a difference in his world.
- Jesus is at the centre of his great plan, and it is in Jesus that we see a human being perfectly living out his life according to God's purpose.
- Following Jesus is something worth living for, something worth dying for, as many people have done through the centuries.

Here are some other ways to explore these issues.

- For people who apparently have everything but still feel empty, read biographies, or articles about the rich and famous in magazines.
- For people who are just getting by with life, but don't know what it is really all about, simply ask contacts, colleagues, friends, 'What do you think life is all about?'
- For the one who held out the offer of life in all its fullness (John 10:10), and spoke about gaining the whole world and yet losing your very self (Luke 9:25) consider Jesus.

Experience

Speak honestly about your own experience of what life is all about, especially if you can remember a time when you weren't a Christian. What did you think then? What do you think now? And what caused the change?

Point people to biographies of people who have found the meaning of life in Jesus.

For example; Cliff Richard, Canon and Ball, Jonathan Edwards.

3: How do I cope with this sense of being alone?

Issues

Commonly held views include:

- Despite knowing many people, I still feel alone.
- People often feel very alone after the death of a loved one.
- Many people feel a sense of rejection or alienation. 'You can have everything in life and still feel lonely, and that is the worst sort of loneliness.' Freddie Mercury, lead singer of Queen, just before his death.

Exploration

Be particularly sensitive when talking about this issue as the person may feel quite emotional about it, even suicidal. If you know you are getting out of your depth, be sure to refer them to someone else who can help, for example a minister, the Samaritans, a doctor.

A sense of aloneness is not uncommon. Don't minimize the depth of feeling or deny the importance of this sense of being alone. Explain that it wasn't meant to be like that. If appropriate, take them to the story of Adam and Eve, and consider how God created Eve because he did not want Adam to be alone. Aloneness was the first human tragedy, but God provided a remedy.

God created us to be in relationship with him and with others. He loves us. This is made perfectly clear throughout the teaching of Jesus. The tragedy is that we have a broken relationship with him and often have broken relationships with others. This fuels the sense of aloneness. We try to go it alone, to do without people, and of course the more we get hurt the more we withdraw into ourselves, actually cutting off the very source of healing for the sense of aloneness we feel. In Jesus we have the one who came to restore broken relationships. One of the incredible things about being a Christian is knowing that Jesus accepts us as we are, with all our hurt and pain and anger and sin. He forgives and offers us a new start. It is possible to be restored to a personal relationship with God, so that we need never be alone.

Also, Christians are 'adopted' into a new family, so that wherever you are in the world you can find people who are brothers and sisters. This doesn't instantly make everything easy - far from it. However, it does mean that we are not alone. Jesus teaches that anyone who

comes to him will not be driven away (John 6:37). Jesus offers freedom from the past. Jesus consistently befriended the outcasts of the society of his day, breaking social and religious convention to meet people who felt very alone, excluded or alienated.

Experience

Be prepared to talk about your experience of aloneness.

4: What happens when I die?

Issues

Common views include:

- Nothing. You die and you rot, that's your lot.
- Reincarnation. You are reincarnated in another life. You may come back as an animal or another human being.
- Everyone goes to heaven.
- You become part of the great ocean of life, your individuality lost within the oneness of being.
- Who knows? No one has come back to tell us.
- Some people have had near-death experiences and speak of light, a tunnel, seeing relatives.

Exploration

- Death is the final statistic - one out of one dies. There is no escaping the reality of it, although lots of people prefer not to talk about it either because they fear to do so is to tempt fate, or because it is too painful.
- Near-death experiences are fascinating, but the scientific world is very divided about their validity. We dare not place our belief about life after death on such controversial evidence.
- Evidence for reincarnation is equally weak. It is also dependent on an endless recycling of life where you hope to atone for a bad life by living a good life. Who is to say when we have lived a good enough life to go up?
- Although it would initially appear attractive if everyone went to heaven, it is quite an appalling thought. It would mean it doesn't matter what you do on earth because ultimately you'll be all right. That would be a terrible world to live in. If there is a God and we are judged for what we do, part of that judgement must make a distinction between right and wrong. Choices on earth carry consequences.

- The only way we could be sure what happens after we die is if someone died and came back and told us.
- That is just what Christians believe happened to Jesus. He died and was raised again to life and therefore his insights into death are worth listening to. The evidence for the resurrection is very strong (see below).
- Jesus speaks of a heaven and a hell (although we need to dismiss those Sunday School images from our minds). Heaven is eternity spent with God, where the overwhelming reality will be God himself. Hell is to spend eternity without God. God doesn't send anyone to hell. Indeed he says 'over my dead body', but if we choose to ignore God in this life he will accept our choice and we will be separated from him for ever.
- Jesus urges us all to respond to his gift of forgiveness and a new start and a sure future to be spent with God forever.

Evidence for the resurrection includes:

- His death. There is no doubt that Jesus was dead when he was taken down from the cross. Experienced guards were sent to break his legs to make sure, and when they discovered he was already dead, they plunged a spear into his side instead.
- The empty tomb. Where did the body go? If the authorities stole it they would have produced it at the first rumours of resurrection. It is unlikely the disciples stole the body as it was guarded by Roman soldiers. Even if they had managed to overpower them, the soldiers would have told, and even if they didn't many of the disciples went on to die for a lie.
- The resurrection appearances; many of them over many weeks to many people. Perhaps the most famous is to Thomas who said he would not believe unless he placed his fingers in the holes in Jesus' hands. Jesus appeared and invited him to do just that. We are not talking about mass hallucinations, or a ghost, but a physical reality - Jesus touching, eating, talking.
- The changed lives of the disciples. From a disillusioned and frightened bunch to a small group prepared to be flogged for what they believed, with many of them ultimately to die as martyrs.
- People today talking about encountering Jesus as if he were alive.

Experience

- Be prepared to talk about the pain of death, especially if you have lost someone close.
- Speak of what gives you hope in the face of death.
- Talk about your own experience of knowing Jesus today. How did that happen? What difference has it made?
- Explore the examples of other people who have encountered Jesus as alive in their own life, and have faced death. For example David Watson in his book *Fear no Evil*.

For further reading

Michael Green, *The Day Death Died*, IVP.

David Watson, *Fear No Evil*, Hodder.

Max Sinclair, *Living in the Light of Heaven*, Hodder.

5: Is there anyone out there?

Issues

Here are some commonly held views:

- A desire to want to 'prove' God
- A belief that science is the only way to prove things
- A belief that 'seeing is believing'
- A belief that to have faith involves either committing intellectual suicide or taking an enormous leap in the dark.
- Many have never taken a serious, concentrated, adult look at Christianity.
- Others have a strong sense of the spiritual, but exactly what the divine being is like is very unclear.

Exploration

There are four main paths to explain the existence of God. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses:

- **Creation:** can lead to 'creation versus evolution' debates
 - **Experience:** can lead to subjectivity, that is, 'If that is your experience, fine, but it is not my experience.'
 - **Bible:** can lead to questions of authenticity, that is, 'Is the Bible reliable?'
 - **Jesus:** can lead to his deity, that is, 'Was Jesus really God on earth?' Careful exploration of the four possible paths will reveal which is the best to pursue. However, in the absence of any other indications, Jesus is probably the best path to follow as he takes us straight to the heart of the gospel.
-
- How could we know if God existed? We could not, unless he chose to reveal himself to us in a way we can understand. That is exactly what he did in Jesus. We could have seen God, touched and spoken to him if we hadn't been born too late.
 - Jesus claimed to be God. His actions bear out that claim. He healed the sick, stilled the storm, brought the dead back to life, exorcized demons. His death on a cross backs up his actions and words. His resurrection backs up his life and death.

- If Jesus is not God then he is either a liar or deluded; that is, he thinks that he is God but he isn't (deluded), or he knows he isn't but says he is (a liar). Read a Gospel and check out the information for yourself. People are often surprised by the amount of evidence for the existence of Jesus.
- There is every good reason to believe Jesus lived. No serious historian disputes his existence as a man on this earth nearly two thousand years ago.
- We constantly believe in things we don't see - for example, love. We can't see it but we can see the effect it has on people.
- Science is not the only way to prove things. You cannot prove events in the past by science. Science involves: You cannot do that with a historical event because by definition it can only happen once. Therefore how do we prove anything in history? By using the other method of deciding if something is true, the method that is used in our law courts: the legal historical method. It involves taking the evidence of witnesses and weighing all the evidence and then deciding if a decision can be made beyond reasonable doubt.
- The evidence that Jesus was not just another great teacher is scattered throughout the Gospels. No one ever lived as he lived. No one has ever taught what he taught. No one has ever seriously claimed what he claimed. No one has ever come back from the dead.

Experience

- Speak honestly of your own experience of what God offers all those who come to him, for example forgiveness, a fresh start, answered prayer, being part of a new family, a certain future beyond death. Being honest and vulnerable at this point is crucial.
- Beware of suggesting God actually offers more than he does.

For further reading

Bill Hybels, *The God You're Looking For*, Nelson.

Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, IVP.

John Chapman, *A Fresh Start*, Hodder.

Observation made, experiment conducted, conclusion drawn, hypothesis made

6: Do all roads lead to God?

Issues

Commonly held views include:

- All roads lead to God
- You can't know which one is right
- You can make up your own religion
- Tolerance is the supreme virtue
- Christians are intolerant
- You believe what you believe because of where you were born
- Christian = religious Westerner
- Claims to exclusive truth are religious bigotry and cause wars and troubles.

Exploration

Religions teach different things:

- Not all religions are the same
- Different teaching about life after death
- Different teaching about God
- Different teaching about how we are saved
- Different teaching about what life is.

All roads don't lead to God:

- Do all roads from Wakefield lead to London?
- All paths lead up the mountain to the same place. How could we know? The statement implies that there is a vantage point off the mountain where you can objectively consider where the paths are going. There is not such vantage point. We are all on the mountain. Unless of course you are God, in which case you alone have the right and ability to indicate which the right path is. The other problem is

that this mountain analogy implies it is about us getting to God, whereas Christianity teaches exactly the opposite, it is about God amazingly coming to us.

- You can spend a lifetime searching and not find what works.

Religion is bound to fail:

- Humanity's nature is flawed
- Example - trying to be good - we always fail.

Revelation - God reaches down:

- God loves his people and reveals himself to us.
- We can gain insights into God through creation
- Christians believe he has revealed himself in some special ways, to the Jews - Old Testament, through Jesus - New Testament.

Jesus:

- His claims - I am the way
- His character
- His death and resurrection
- The crucial question. Is he God on earth in human form? If he is, he alone can truly show us what God is like.

The early history of the Church:

- Millions switched religion? Why?
- Many converted from Judaism to Christianity.
- Why did they make the change? Jesus and the resurrection.

Are all other religions wrong then?

- Answer is yes and no. All have some insights into God, people and the world.

- But none have the special revelation that Jesus brought - and that is something too good to miss.

Is everyone except for born-again Christians lost?

- Will thousands who have never heard the gospel go to hell? God is just and ultimately no one will be able to accuse God that what he says of them is 'unfair'. It helps to emphasize the difference between a person who hasn't heard honestly searching and a person who uses this question as an excuse to get off the hook. You have heard and you have a chance to respond to Jesus now. You can accept or reject him. Leave the others to God's justice and mercy.

The claims and life of Jesus:

- The person of Jesus is central - we are calling people to follow Jesus, not to join a religion. Keep the emphasis on what Jesus said and did rather than what the church/Christians believe and teach. He made remarkable claims for himself and lived up to them.

Experience

- Tell how your own faith has brought you into a real relationship with God.
- Talk about your own failures in trying to be religious.
- Tell of God's love in finding, forgiving and healing you through Jesus.

7: Hasn't science disproved Christianity?

Issues

Commonly held views include:

- Science has dismissed Christianity as irrelevant because it and not Christianity provides the answers to the questions of life.
- In the past Christianity was only needed because of our lack of knowledge about things, that is the 'God of the gaps' argument.
- Science and Christianity are in conflict with one another.
- Scientists aren't Christians.
- Science has disproved the six-day creation story of Genesis 1-3.

Exploration

- Science and Christianity are not in conflict because they are both trying to make sense of the world we live in.
- Science seeks to explore the ordering of the world, to answer the 'how' questions. Christianity also explores the ordering of the world, but addresses the 'why' questions.
- Historically Christianity gave rise to the development of science because it provided the context in which exploration of God's created order was encouraged.
- During the enlightenment a gradual divorce occurred between the world of publicly held facts and the world of private beliefs or values. The result of this has been the enthroning of science in the public world as the only 'real' way to gain knowledge or facts. Matters of faith were relegated to the personal world, and seen as subjective and relative. This division is false.
- When it comes to the creation of the world, the vital issue is not so much how it came about, but why God started it in the first place. Christians have different opinions about how to read Genesis 1-3 in terms of the physical creation, but agree that the account is primarily telling us about why God made us and what has gone wrong.
- Many sciences actually help with our understanding of Christianity, for example archaeology.
- A considerable number of leading scientists are Christians, often citing their own exploration of the world in all its amazing complexity as evidence enough for a creating God behind it all.

'In the absence of any other evidence the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence.' Einstein

Therefore:

- Invite people to consider the complexities of the universe and ask how much do we know about it all in terms of a percentage - five per cent? Ten per cent? Twenty per cent? Once you've agreed a figure, and it is likely to be small, ask if there is any possibility that God may exist in all the things we don't know about the universe?
- Encourage people to ponder the complexities of the universe in all its intricate detail. Do they really think it can have all happened by chance?
- People tend to believe that good is right. Why is that if we are only here by chance? Why should the world be a good place? Why shouldn't evil prevail?

Experience

- Encourage people to read the stories of scientists who are Christians, for example David Wilkinson and John Polkinghorne.

For further reading

David Wilkinson, *God, the Big Bang and Stephen Hawking*, Monarch

John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity*, Triangle.

8: Why does God allow suffering?

Another way of approaching this one!

Issues

Here are some commonly held views:

- People struggle with the idea that an all-powerful God doesn't do something about the suffering in the world.
- Huge sense of the injustice of suffering.
- The issue may be raised on a global or personal level. Be aware of the possibility of powerful and painful feelings behind the question; the person may have suffered deeply themselves or may have a relative dying of cancer, for example.

Exploration

- There is no easy answer. Admit your own struggles with the problem. Although no easy answer, there are signposts from God along the road of life to help us in our understanding of suffering.

- **Signpost 1:**

God did not want there to be purposeless suffering in the world. He made the world to be a place where we would live in his world in his way. Sadly we rebelled against him - an option open to us because he did not make us robots but relating beings with free choice. Most suffering in the world is a result of this general rebellion. (Beware of linking too closely specific sin with specific suffering. Many people think God is punishing them for some specific wrong and so that's why their child is dying, for example.) Human beings cause so much suffering through an essential selfishness. (It is worth noting that some suffering is positive and very necessary. The child burning her hand in the fire learns from the pain.)

- **Signpost 2:** God has not given up on his world. He came into the world and knows what suffering is like, for he has himself suffered on the cross. Indeed he has taken on himself the sufferings of the whole world. In a very real sense he was the only truly innocent sufferer. You may ask what would help a friend if they were suffering from a terminal illness. Help them to think about what has aided them if they have suffered. The answer is often someone who has been alongside them in their suffering, not necessarily providing all the answers, but showing they care. This is exactly what God has done.

- **Signpost 3:** We know what God is like because he has shown himself to us in Jesus. We know that God does not rejoice in suffering. God shares in our suffering. He weeps when we weep. He is not sitting on a cloud unable to sympathize with us. He came down into

the world and has suffered, horrendously. He did this because he loves us and wants to offer us hope of redemption and resurrection.

- **Signpost 4:** God can bring good out of suffering. This is the message of *redemption*; bringing good out of terrible situations. Be sure to explain that doesn't mean God causes the suffering in the first place

- **Signpost 5:** God offers us a new hope. This is the message of the *resurrection*. There will be no more suffering in the new creation that God is to bring about. He wants us to be a part of that. Ultimately this all hinges on the life of Jesus himself. It is incredibly important that people are helped to focus on the cross, not just as an interesting event in history, but in terms of the significance of this event for all history. On the cross he won for us a new way of living and dying. Biographies of Christians who have suffered can also be helpful evidence that it is possible to suffer and believe, for example Joni Erickson-Tada, Corrie ten Boom.

Experience

- We must be very careful when speaking of our own experience of suffering. The danger is to compare what we have been through with what others are going through. There may be similarities but they are never the same. It may be helpful, but be sensitive.
- Better still is to listen to their experience of suffering, not feeling the need to defend God. He is quite capable of doing that himself. We may need to listen and allow the person to express their feelings of anger, guilt and sorrow.

For further reading

James Jones, *Suffering*, IVP

C S Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Fount

9: Aren't all good people Christians?

Commonly held views:

- 'You don't have to go to church to be a Christian.' 'All good people are Christians.'
- 'Church is dull, boring, irrelevant.' Behind this may be negative past experiences of church.
- People think being a Christian is first and foremost about being good.
- They think that sin is something other people do, and that our rebellion is not really that bad.
- They believe it actually doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.
- They may struggle with pride when they understand becoming a Christian means admitting they have been wrong and God is right. They want to do it themselves.

Exploration

- **What is a Christian?** Who has the right to decide? Surely only one person, the founder of the movement. You can be a good person and not be a Christian. A Christian is someone whose attitude towards God has changed.
- **What is good?** How can we define good? How good do we have to be to please God? Do we all have the same equal chance to be good by our standards?
- **What is sin?** Here it is vital to emphasize the difference between sin and sins. Sin is our attitude of rebellion against God, pushing him out of the centre of our lives because we think we know better than him. Sins are the consequences of this initial act.
- **Is sincerity enough?** No. You can be sincerely wrong. We must identify the division between public fact and private values which exists in our society today.
- **Why church?** Going to church doesn't make you a Christian, just as sleeping in a garage doesn't make you a car. However, Christians go to church because becoming a Christian involves being a part of the family of God. The family of the church exists to help us worship and serve God in daily life.

Consider

- Jesus surely provides us with the perfect example of a good person.
- See how the opening chapters of the Bible describe the consequences of sin in terms of four broken relationships which are clearly mirrored in our world today:

Experience

- I know that if I tried to live up to God's standards for one week I would fail miserably. If I try and earn my way into friendship with God I will very quickly give up through guilt, failure or simply not being able to live with the uncertainty of not knowing whether I had been good enough.
- Speak about your own experience of discovering the alternative way to friendship with God, the cross of Christ and his free offer of forgiveness and a fresh start in life. It is a gift to be received not a commendation to be earned.

10: Why Jesus and not any other religious leader?

Issues

Common views include:

- Jesus was a great man, but in essence no different from any other great religious leader.
- He was the Son of God, but that simply means he had a special relationship with God, not that in any way was he totally unique.
- What right has a Christian to say that Jesus was any better than any other religious leader? Surely this is the height of arrogance.
- It doesn't matter anyway because all religious teachers have just one angle on the truth. We can learn from them all.

Exploration

- Jesus was different from other religious leaders because of what he claimed about himself and what he did. This is NOT to say that other religious leaders aren't to be listened to, or that we can't learn some things from them, but they are different in what they said and did.
- Jesus claimed to be God in human form, and when challenged about this claim didn't back down. The life he led, the things he said and the death he died all back this claim.
- He existed before time, so he came from heaven to earth for a particular reason; to reveal God to us and to rescue us from the consequences of going our own way.
- In *Mere Christianity*, C S Lewis put it like this: Jesus was either a lunatic, deluded about himself, or a liar, deliberately deceiving others. Or he was who he claimed he was, Lord of Creation, God in human form. The one thing we cannot say of him is that he was just another good man. If he was a good man and claimed to be God he was a liar or a lunatic and therefore not good. If we look at his life, liar and lunatic don't fit the life he lived; only Lord really fits the evidence.
- Jesus performed the most amazing miracles, not just healing people, but taking dominion over nature and evil spirits.
- Jesus died a bizarre death at a young age, claiming he was doing this to make it possible for humankind to be reconciled with God.
- Jesus was raised again from death and appeared to hundreds of people over a five-week period.

- Of course Christians have no right to say Jesus is ‘better’ or different than anyone else. But we do have the right to point people to what Jesus said about himself and what he did. We don’t make any arrogant claim ourselves; we simply point people to what Jesus claimed.

In essence the evidence is found in the Bible, especially the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life.

The following passages are a good place to start:

- Mark 1:21-27. The demons declare Jesus is the holy one of God.
- Mark 4:35-41. Jesus calms the storm.
- Mark 8:27-30. Peter recognizes Jesus is the Messiah.
- John 1:1-14. John’s introduction to Jesus as the Word who was God coming into the world.
- John 8:12-59. Jesus debates with the Jewish religious leaders about who he is.
- John 14:1-14. Jesus speaks of knowing the Father.
- John 18:33-38. Jesus debates with Pilate.
- Colossians 1:15-20. Paul describes Jesus as the visible image of the invisible God.
- Hebrews 1 speaks of the nature of Jesus.

Experience

- It helps if you have considered other world religious leaders and can talk about their teachings and life. However, don’t pretend to know more than you do. In talking with people of other faith backgrounds it is vital to respect and honour their leaders, without agreeing that they are the same as Jesus.
- Speak of your own experience of what Jesus has done for you.

For further reading

Nicky Gumbel, *Why Jesus?*

Nicky Gumbel, *Any questions*

www.rejesus.co.uk

11: Are the New Testament documents reliable?

Issues

Generally held views include:

- The documents were written so long ago they cannot be accurate.
- The Bible has been rewritten many times.
- The gap between the event and the written record means exaggeration/distortion will have occurred.
- The gap between the original manuscripts and the existing copies is so large they cannot be accurate copies.
- Those who wrote it were biased.
- In translation it has been changed.

Exploration

It is worth assuming that people will accept the Bible unless they tell you otherwise. If someone is genuinely concerned then it is worth pointing them to one of the books on the matter, but if the person is expressing a passing concern then the following may be helpful. People do make decisions on a daily basis based on belief in history. Of course no history is purely objective, but that doesn't mean it is inaccurate. To find out if documents written so long ago can be accurate we must ask:

Who they were written by?

- Some by eyewitnesses, some by others.

When they were written?

- Some only twenty-five years after Jesus' death.

Why were they written?

- To provide an accurate record of Jesus' life, death and resurrection for future generations.

How do we decide if a manuscript is accurate?

- The number of copies we have.
- The date between the original and the first existing copy. The gap between the event and the first account is often not that great - thirty years. They began writing because they wanted future generations to have access to accurate information.

What about the gap between the events and the record?

- They didn't have to remember it for thirty years, just day to day as they passed it on.
- Easily remembered because Jesus taught in short pithy sayings and in parable stories.
- Society of the day was different from ours: not so dependent on the written word; the ability to faithfully record from memory was highly valued (compare with Africa today).
- You often gain a more faithful account of an event sometime after it has occurred, for example there is a better record of the Vietnam War than of the Gulf War.

What about the author's bias?

- The authors were interested, therefore more likely to write an accurate history.
- Collaboration? They would have ironed out the difficulties to make it more palatable. Once again it is a matter of weighing the evidence carefully to see which the most probable option is.
- Other ancient manuscripts of the day, for example Josephus, Pliny, Tacitus, mention Christianity and/or Jesus.
- Early commentaries on the Gospels by the early Fathers enable us to piece together some of the Gospels.
- Archaeological evidence constantly verifies places mentioned in the New Testament, for example the Colonnade mentioned in John was recently excavated.
- Comparison with other ancient manuscripts. Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars* makes a good comparison. He wrote sixty years before Jesus' birth. Eight manuscripts exist, the earliest of which is dated to the eighth century AD. In comparison we have 25,000 manuscripts dating up to the fourth century for the New Testament. The earliest fragment dates back to AD130, and the earliest New Testament to AD 350 (*Codex Sinaiticus*, located in the British Museum).

Experience

- Jesus talked of the Old Testament as being the word of God.
- In our reading we discover how incredibly relevant to everyday life the Bible is. It is the experience of many that things leap out of the page applying to daily concerns.

For further reading

Nick Pollard, *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult*, IVP, Chapter 13.



Way of Life resources are produced by the Diocese of Truro Discipleship Team. They are designed to help individuals, small groups, and congregations explore their faith and enable them to flourish in Jesus Christ.