



I've Got A Question?

By Kurt von Schleicher

Asking intelligent questions can be one of the most natural ways to connect with an irreligious person.

"Kurt, you were raised in a traditional church; tell me... what do you think about religion in general." Mitch, a coworker and one of the bellmen that I supervised at a Dallas hotel in the mid '80s, asked me this as we sat down for dinner one night in the employee cafeteria. *"Excuse me Mitch?"* Caught a little off guard I responded to him, blinking in surprise. As he restated the question, my mind was racing through a whole bunch of possible options. Did he really want to know what I thought about religion? Did he want to spar with me, knowing I was one of those "born agains"—a Christian who was attending a Bible teaching church after having left my traditional upbringing?

I didn't know Mitch all that well yet, so I wasn't sure if he was joking with me or maybe had something else on his mind. "Mitch, that is one of the most interesting questions anyone has asked me in a long time," I responded. "Why do you want to know?"

"Well, we know that you're really religious and all. And I've studied theology a bit and thought, well,...we could have a meaningful discussion about religious stuff." Now he was the one that was scrambling for words.

I was happy that Mitch wanted to talk and I drew him out by saying: "I find it totally fascinating that you think I'm religious, because I'm really not and neither is the God I serve for that matter, but tell me what makes you say that?" Mitch explained that the other hotel workers talk about how much I know the Bible and can quote it in relation to the daily work problems we all faced. The other bellmen told me that, "religion means a lot to Kurt and it is somehow very real to him." Mitch added that while he attended Catholic schools growing up and had learned about Church history, he didn't know much about the Bible.

That was a humble confession, I thought and without sounding too excited, I probed further: "Mitch, I think you're telling me you want to know more about the Bible. Am I way off?" When Mitch nodded, I asked, "A lot of

people think the Bible is very irrelevant and mysterious, kind of spooky like. May I ask you why you'd like to find out more about the Bible?"

A painfully serious expression suddenly appeared on Mitch's face and he told me that he, "wanted to live a cleaner and moral life, you know, pleasing to God." He went on to say, "Paul, and I like to smoke weed, go to the clubs and topless joints after we get off work and sometimes we get into some pretty hairy knock-down, drag-out fights. I've been thinking that there must be a safer way to enjoy life. A way that makes me feel better about myself on the inside." (Paul was Mitch's brother who was also one of my pleasure-seeking bellmen at that downtown hotel.) When I got this earful about their private lives I quickly said, "I sense this is kind of hard for you to throw all this my way. Is this something you really want to go into with me? I am glad to listen anytime." "Oh yeah, I think you can handle it." he responded.

I then asked him what he thought the Bible could give him that his topless joints couldn't. Mitch sheepishly said, "Hope and inner strength."

When I asked if he'd like to study the Bible together with me on break time, he responded, "Sure man, that would be cool! I didn't know how to approach you with this kind of talk, but do you mind if Paul joins in with us? I feel kind of concerned for his wild soul, as well."

Mitch's question about religion was the easiest way he could think of to get into a conversation with me about spiritual matters. His real worry was about the spiritual status of his brother along with his own standing against eternity. To some degree, he wanted counseling. Had I responded to him with a hyper-theological treatise on the doctrine of religion, I probably would have missed his heart by miles and possibly even offended his whole family with their valued religious heritage.

Instead, I responded to his questions with a few of my own and was learning the effectiveness of making a "question-connection" in witnessing. I still ask questions to this day to create authentic conversation and find out what the real issues are.

Even before Mitch and I had this talk, I had been learning about the power questions can have to provoke thought and conversation about spiritual matters. I once heard, "Behind every question is a statement, behind every statement is a philosophy of life and behind every philosophy of life is a felt need." The lady who told me this experienced this truth firsthand some years earlier when she had gingerly asked a trusted mentor, "How do you personally handle depression?" Her mentor quipped, "Oh, I just exit one depression, push ahead and then fall into yet another one, as a way of existence." I thought that was sure an awkward ending to their discussion. Now, this lady longed to find out more about her own depression and how she could overcome these terrible feelings, as any normal person would. Behind her question was her statement: "I am depressed and need help desperately." Behind that statement were feelings of fear that her depression would swallow her up, so she turned to her respected mentor-friend hoping that person would help her. And had this so called mentor responded with just a few intelligent questions rather than a cheep half-glib, half joking statement, the two of them could have connected about what was

really going on and possibly come up with a positive solution to their problems with depression.

When You Feel The Tendency To Be Verbally Shallow, Go Deeper

As influencers for Jesus Christ, we must know that real witnessing conversations take place when we press on to the feelings behind the shallow statements! Asking questions in a way that shows respect is one way for us to achieve this. Just respectfully questioning further in a casual non-threatening way uncovers the feelings behind the statements. When we can talk about how we truly feel, our lives begin to change. Isn't it that way for you when you get alone to pray?

The fact is, we miss out on real ministry when we fail to ask good questions. We end up scratching an itch that doesn't itch, or that used to itch in years gone by. Take evangelism, for example. When most of us learn the nuts and bolts of sharing our faith (as an outgrowth of the strength we've found in Christ rather than mere duty, or from guilt), we basically learn to clearly articulate relevant information that affects the irreligious where they live. We lend an ear and then on their level and in their vernacular, we explain the key elements of the unwatered-down gospel. We may even learn to anticipate certain common objections and memorize verses to counter that opposition. These are valuable skills we all need to master. Yet today, we Christians rarely spend much time at all learning how to create meaningful conversation within which we can hear what the other person is thinking and feeling. Think about it! What would happen if we would just slow down the dialogue by asking some good questions, listen intently to hear what the other person is thinking about, and in the spirit of godly verbal exchange talk through -- truly talk through the issues in the light of Holy Writ?

When we are prematurely ready with pat Christian answers before we know what the questions are, we miss opportunities to discern people's honest questions. And besides, all unbelievers are very adept at smelling the difference between a real listener and a fake.

Wer schnell seinen Mund öffnet, bevor der Frager seine Frage beendet hat,
ist ein Narr im vollen Sinn!

He who quickly opens his mouth, before letting the questioner finish their
question, is what most would consider a fool with a capital "F."

~ German Proverb

One day my wife and I were over visiting at the beautiful three story, wooden home of a wealthy German couple in Friedburg, Germany, not far from where we lived. Helmut, our host with his Ph.D., was a semi-warm, funny and gregarious type. He was Gerti's husband and a professional "new age" motivational speaker for many large conglomerates located all over the E.U. He was a lot of fun to be around most of the time, that is until he got a little obnoxious after having one too many beers. But you should have seen the beautiful schwäbisch meal they fixed for us, and our conversation that

night was full of laughter and was very pleasant for quite some time. We had prayed together at their request and now really wanted them to know how fun-loving and normal we were, just so they wouldn't be scared off for all eternity.

Now outgoing Helmut, was normally the spokesman for the couple of course, every time we came by. And he knew all there was to know about spiritual things too, but on this cool Bavarian evening Gerti, his wife, was much more open and talkative. She was getting to know us better, but part of the reason was because we had recently led her drug addict son, Marcus, to Jesus Christ and she had noticed some what of change in him. Out of the blue, the Schmiedbauers asked us, "Do you believe that only people who are 'born again' go to heaven?"

I sensed that they had discussed this at length and had a lot on their minds. This was just the tip of the iceberg so to speak, and I didn't want to blow it, so pushing back my finely honed evangelism skills (ha ha), I instead replied, "What an interesting question and I'm so glad you asked. If you don't mind, what's behind it?"

What tumbled out were some conflicting and false religious doctrines which they grew up with. They both had some valid frustrations that they were feeling, partly because of their son's repetitive hounding and over-zealous pushiness in trying to win them to his new found Savior. I think another part was because of the Holy Spirit's conviction settling on them. Though their son, Marcus, had been clearer minded these days, he had been mixing a little criticism in with his witnessing strategy. As I listened to his parents, I realized that a thorough theological exegesis of several German Bible passages about the conversion experience, (which they both needed to have), wouldn't at that time have blessed or ministered to them at all. Instead my wife Liney and I only lightly shared from John chapter three and asked them a series of questions that really seemed to help them,... well at least they helped Gerti, to explore her feelings about Marcus' criticism that were beginning to be heaped up on her conscience. She had some sentimental feelings concerning their family's affiliation with the traditional State Church, but she really took to our candor and concern, as well. (Helmut, by this time, might have already crossed over the line sucking down those cool ones!?)

We couldn't win the Schmiedbauers that night, but the blinders were beginning to fall off Gerti's eyes, and through her son, she went on to set up another meeting with my wife. They planned to go shopping downtown together (without Helmut's assistance). Well the day came around for that shopping spree, and Gerti proceeded to ask my wife to further explain what being born again really meant and would cost. And in the safety of having first been heard -- fully heard out, Gerti accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior. It was such a beautiful scene in a typically quaint bistro, as the two ladies sat down for a cup of coffee and the sinner's prayer. In a moment, Frau Schmiedbauer was gloriously transformed, never to be the same again, and just around the corner was her son Marcus giving Liney the high sign and dancing a unique jig of rejoicing before the Lord. What's more, we became even more grateful to Jesus, because little did we know that a year

or so latter, Gerti would die of Breast Cancer and go home to heaven. It was very tragic, because she was so young. You can imagine how hard it was for all involved, but at least we know where Gerti is.

It took a couple years more of praying for Helmut, but he also eventually gave his life to Christ. He has become an avid student of the Bible now--studying its contents for hours at a time. He has started up a ministry for alcoholics who are trying to break free, as God graced him to do. You should see him with all the highlighting pens in hand, quickly writing down the notes. No more new age seminars for Helmut, just new-life seminars.

Creating conversations by asking good questions is a skill that can be perfected. Jesus, Himself was a master at asking questions as He witnessed of His loving heavenly Father. When I read through the Gospel of Mark to track the way Jesus used questions, I found that throughout His earthly ministry of teaching and healing, Jesus used questions to explain principles and to expose stinking-thinking. That's where churches got that old term "catechism" from. It came from this type of teaching style with questions. Jesus often cut to the chase and used questions to help people articulate what they wanted from Him. He answered their questions with questions, as well.

"In relation to Christianity or Christians, have you had a negative experience that you would care to talk about?" That was the question my son, Stephan and I recently asked a post-punk, alternative X-er named, Drew. He was leaning up against the wall outside of a tattoo parlor in Deep Ellum near downtown Dallas. "Yes!" Drew replied, "My parents who are pastors in a very large southern denomination just told me, 'Drew, you get out of our home and never return. We don't accept how you look and we will not compromise for you or anyone.'" (Drew was trying to fit-in down there sporting close to ten body piercings through his face, lips and plucked eye brows, and with the wires interconnecting many of them, it looked kind of like exterior braces to me.)

Drew proceeded to tell us how he reacted to her in his pain, "Mom, you are thirty pounds over weight and I can't compromise or accept how you look, so I never want to talk with you again until you change your appearance." Ouch on two counts! Can you imagine the family fracture? But after spending another twenty minutes explaining to him what our heavenly Father was like and how He accepted Drew with all of his innate uniqueness – yes just as he is. Drew seemed moved. He admitted he was bitter, said he never had a problem with Jesus personally and did request prayer so he could begin forgiving his parents. And not only that, but Drew opened the door of his heart to receive Jesus as Savior. It was so cool, because some other long-haired friends of his, with huge tattoos stretching up their necks just like Drew's, approached him during our prayer and Drew warded them off with, "Just a minute, can't you see we're praying?"

Here are four types of questions that greatly enhance our effectiveness in getting to the real issues people have: probing questions, personal questions, process questions, and provocative questions.

Probing Questions

One type of question to master is the non-interrogating but polite probing type of question. With probing questions we go after more information to determine the true spiritual situation. Consider Jesus in Mk. 3: 1-6. He encountered a man with a withered hand, who was probably unable to work and provide for himself. Jesus, sensing that the Pharisees were lurking near by in wait for Him to break the Sabbath by healing the man probed: "Is it legal to do good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing harm? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?" (NLT) Jesus wanted to probe their hearts, to expose their stubborn hard-heartedness, and to appeal to a submerged but higher sense of mercy. By asking rather than accusing, His probing question exposed the wickedness of their hearts without employing the enemy's commonly used method.

Be careful though, because probing questions can be overused. Since probing questions go after information, the questioner needs to be Spirit-tactful not to seek more information than the person is willing to disclose. One way to soften a probing question is to first state an observation. When Mitch asked me about religion, a probing question such as, "*Why would you ask such a religious question?*" would have been too abrupt and might have come off a bit harsh. I softened the probe by acknowledging his curious nature in a complementary way when I said, "*That is one of the most interesting questions anyone has asked me in a long long time.*" Then I lightly added, "Why do you want to know?" By focusing on the observation, I didn't put him on the spot in an uncomfortable way.

Personal Questions

Personal questions are one form of probing question, but they are doing more than just drawing out additional information. Personal questions help people explain their inner most feelings. When I said to Mitch, "A lot of people think the Bible is very irrelevant and mysterious, kind of spooky like. May I ask you why you'd like to find out more about the Bible?" I asked him a very personal question. Going beyond his interest or knowledge of religious topics, I asked him why he wanted to know more about the Bible. It was no surprise to me when Mitch got serious. His desire to know more about the Bible was actually linked to the spiritual distress he felt about the immoral lifestyle of himself and his brother Paul. My question uncovered some very personal facts. Because of the potential for personal questions to expose people in this way, it is a wise thing to word personal questions in a way that asks permission.

In Mk. 8: 27-33, Jesus was talking with His disciples as they walked between villages. He asked them, "Who do people say I am?" He probed for more information and they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets." Then instead of stopping there for fear of being misunderstood, Jesus took the level of questioning even deeper when He asked, "Who do you say I am?" Now, our Lord wanted them to disclose what they personally thought. He was asking them to declare their own beliefs apart from the influence of the masses.

Later, when Jesus was entering Jericho, a blind man named Bartimaeus cried out after the Lord. The also crowd tried to hush him up, but Jesus stopped to give him the gifts of time and meaningful interaction. He threw his cloak aside, jumped to his feet, and came to Jesus (Mk. 10: 46-52). "What do you want me to do for you? Jesus asked. 'Teacher,' the blind man said, I want to see!"

Well that question was pretty much right to the point. Check it out, Jesus met Bartimaeus at his point of need and asked him a very personal question -- What did he want? I can almost imagine the pressing crowd around them, shoving, pushing, yelling -- anything just to get a closer look at what was happening with the Jesus movement. But in the middle of it all, Jesus had a private exchange with a man who responded to a very pointed personal question by asking Bartimaeus about the most vital thing he could wish for -- his sight!

Process Questions

Now, what are process questions? They are the questions that guide what's going on during a conversation. When I was talking to my bellman friend at the hotel, I sensed that he was divulging much more information than he had initially intended on disclosing. I backed up the conversation a bit by saying, "I sense this is kinda' hard for you to throw all this my way. Is this something you really want to go into with me? I am glad to listen anytime." That gave my work colleague permission to slow down, stop, continue or redirect the conversation. Fully reassured of the respect I had for his life, he proceeded, "Oh yeah, I think you can handle it."

Process questions also give the questioner insight into how another person is dealing with a situation. I recently saw a situation on TV with an older man who was informed that his kidneys were shutting down. He needed to begin dialysis right away to stay alive, but before he made his life or death decision this man asked his daughter what to do. The daughter of course gently responded, *"Dad, this is your decision all the way. I want to help you in anyway I can, but I can't tell you what to do in this situation. It's your life and I'll stand with you in whatever you decide."* Then the dad decided not to go on dialysis, but to let nature takes its course.

When the daughter described this exchange to her closest friend, she was definitely helped when her friend asked, "What is it like for you now to know that short of a miracle, your dad is choosing to go?" Timing and tone are always important factors, but questions like these would naturally help a daughter process her own feelings. Just to open up and be able to tell a friend one-on-one, about the weight she was carrying--that's so therapeutic.

Provocative Questions

Provocative questions generate thoughtful conversations. They get to the heart of the matter. One time, at this same place of employment downtown, I said to a group of lost valet runners, "You all mention the name of Jesus so freely. Tell me what you really think of this wonderful person?"

After they got a grip and picked themselves up on the ground, my question provoked a lively conversation about Christ's deity. Each of them had plenty to say. No one had ever asked them that question before. Over the next several days, conversations about the Lord grew out this discussion.

The problem with most of us Christians is that we tend to be nicer than Jesus. We wouldn't think to be assertive and stand up to some heat, or be righteously provoking, because this type of thing risks offending someone. But our Lord was no wimp. He excelled in presenting provocative questions. He sparred with those who tested Him, with the religiously prideful who refused to believe. And it was never for strife's sake. When the teachers of the Law and the elders approached Him asking, "By whose authority did you drive out the merchants from the Temple? Who gave you such authority?" Jesus answered them with a very provocative question, "I'll tell who gave me authority to do these things if you answer one question, Jesus replied. Did John's baptism come from heaven or was it merely human? Answer me!" (Mk. 11:28-33). Though they had repeatedly tried to trap Him, Jesus' provocative question reversed the situation, putting them on the defensive. Provocative questions can create needed conversation and important discussion. Why? Because behind every opinion there's a statement. Behind every statement there's a philosophy. Behind every philosophy there's a felt need -- a need that only God can fill. Lost people have lots of needs that truly matter to a God that feels for them and wants to get closer, inquire deeper and meet them. Let's remember that behind statements reside feelings -- even in a non-lively exchange. And sometimes an energized discussion will allow those feelings and opinions to emerge that otherwise would stay hidden.

Questions open doors into another person's life. Good questions aren't easy to formulate or use. It's simpler to make statements and express opinions that we've already heard other Christians say, than to ask the necessary questions. Asking questions requires us to focus on the other person and think for ourselves. It also requires us to listen and value what the other person has to say, remembering how extremely valuable they as a person are.

Be yourself! Release mechanical formulaic constraints. Witnessing with questions can be so casual and enjoyable. It's basically just making friends for Jesus. Learning to ask questions that foster or create conversations is a great skill that any of us can master with practice and prayer. Asking valid questions demonstrates that we really care when most of the world doesn't. As people are listened to, feel heard, valued, understood and loved, they will in turn tell us more in a response to the good questions.