

Responding to comments or questions that people come up with

There are various important factors to bear in mind when responding.

1. What is behind the issue?

When people make a comment or ask a question, there may be a very obvious response, but it may sometimes be the case that there are other hidden issues in what they say. So we should always have in mind, "What may lie behind this?"

Eg If someone asks about how a good and just God can allow people to die of cancer, we could go into an attempted answer about the consequences of the Fall that could be true and helpful, but it could be that someone close to your friend has recently died of cancer. If that is the case, a more sensitive approach is needed. We could either ask, "Is this a theoretical question, or one that's close to your own experience?", or we could simply be careful and sensitive without actually probing further.

Eg If someone asks if people who have never heard the gospel can be saved, we may need to bear in mind any elderly relatives who they loved but have died recently, or the East Asian sense of belonging to your people in a way that may make it hard to contemplate Christian faith if their ancestors never had a chance at salvation.

If you have no idea what might lie behind their question or if you're not quite sure what they're asking, do ask them to elaborate and clarify – "I'm not totally sure I understand your question. Could you explain a little more what you mean?" or "That's a good question. Could you elaborate a bit more on it?" etc.

2. What does the Bible say"

What you actually say may or may not use the Bible directly, but your whole way of thinking about life and everything we are should constantly seek to be informed and moulded by the teaching of the Bible. Whenever any issue arises, you should be thinking about it in in Biblical way.

Depending on the person you are talking with and the occasion, you may decide to express your response in terms of "Let's see what the Bible says", or simply by giving a response which is full of Biblical truth, but without actually putting it in those terms.

Showing that you seek to understand what the Bible teaches on any issue is an important way of modelling its authority and importance to a Christian. Where appropriate, opening the Bible to show them the verses directly can go a long way in demonstrating that you're not just expressing your own personal/British view, but the Biblical teaching. It might also introduce them to reading the Bible for themselves eventually.

3. Your experience or borrowed experience

This can also be very helpful, as long as you try not to make this the only basis for a response, ignoring #2 above.

In today's world many people are genuinely interested to hear other people's stories, so if you have no direct experience of an issue, build up a good store of borrowed experience - stories to tell - from others.

4. Depend on the Holy Spirit, not on your own "wisdom"

God may use our experience and wisdom, but we must always remember that "unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain."

5. Be willing to appeal to someone's own culture

This is dangerous, so you should only do this if you really know the cultural issues well. If you are unsure, you can still try this, but do it tentatively - "I'm not sure if I've got this right, but maybe you can tell me..."

Eg When trying to explain what the Bible means by being spiritually dead or alive, you could say, "I wonder if in the literature in your language you have some story about a son who goes completely against his father's will, and this breaks the relationship completely ..." You could continue this to explain further, but I was once interrupted at this point by a Thai student, who said, "Ah yes - My son is dead!" Allusions to people's own literature and traditions can be very powerful to illustrate points like this.

Eg "Is it really worse not to believe in God than to be a murderer?" My response to this question tried to explore (in East Asian thinking in this case) the deep sense of respect for parents and the elderly, and how terrible it is to offend or ignore them. The "God is a far greater Father to us than our own biological fathers, and to ignore Him or to offend Him is the worst thing we could ever do."