

USING EVANGELISTIC QUESTIONNAIRES WITH INTEGRITY

Agapé Resource Centre
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➔ GETTING STARTED DECEPTIVELY?

British culture is generally introverted. Going up to a stranger and initiating friendly conversation is not regarded as a normal thing for a British person to do. There are a few exceptions, walking in the countryside or when something goes wrong, but in most situations to initiate conversation with a stranger without an obvious reason requires us to overcome a degree of suspicion and caution.

This awkwardness is amplified when our desire in initiating the conversation is not to have small talk but to discuss the deepest questions of life. We'll not meet anyone who feels neutral about Jesus when they realise who he is and what he claims.

Our desire to boldly share Christ not just with those we know but with everyone everywhere means we have to work out not only how to get past this barrier ourselves but to help others to do the same. Consistently we have found the most effective way to do this has been to use evangelistic questionnaires. It's not unusual for people to be approached with a questionnaire, it helps guide our discussion and it helps us to listen well.

However, this has raised objections in some people's minds to the integrity of this approach to sharing our faith. For others, the failure to give consideration to these questions of integrity can mean we use the questionnaire inappropriately and undermine the confidence of those to whom we are talking.

In this article we'll leave aside the important questions of how to develop rapport, to listen accurately and empathetically, to ask good follow up questions and to discern where the other person is coming from. We'll limit ourselves to considering the question of integrity and how that affects the confidence both of those using the questionnaire and those answering it.

➔ WHY ARE WE DOING THE QUESTIONNAIRE?

The root of the unease that some people feel is usually centred around the question of why we are doing the questionnaire. Are we genuinely interested in their views or is our real motivation for doing the questionnaire to share the gospel with them? The answer to this question is not as straightforward as it might seem as it's related to our whole philosophy and approach to evangelism.

Clearly doing a questionnaire is not the same thing as sharing the message of Christ. In the early days of Agapé, Bill Bright would approach people and ask if they were interested in how they could know God personally. If they said yes, he would simply share a gospel outline with them. This is great and very valid way of sharing our faith. However, this approach also has its challenges. Firstly, it requires a lot of faith and confidence on the part of the evangelist. It is a big step for people getting started in sharing their faith, and for many who have been sharing their faith for years!

Secondly, Western culture has drifted much further from its Christian heritage since the early days of Agapé. There are many people we meet who would be very reluctant to express this level of interest in spiritual things, but may be willing to engage in a discussion of spiritual issues.

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A questionnaire offers a way of engaging people in spiritual discussion which is less threatening both for them and for the evangelist. However, in view of this we need to think through what we are seeking to do with the questionnaire. We also need the way we introduce the questionnaire and our explanation of why we're doing it to have integrity.

Here are a few observations on the purpose of the questionnaire:

- It gives us a chance to develop relationship, rapport and trust.
- It allows us to learn about how non-believers perceive spiritual issues.
- It allows us to engage people in spiritual conversation.
- It helps us to understand where individuals are on their spiritual journey.
- It prompts people to think about the deeper questions of life.
- It gives people who are answering the questionnaire the opportunity to think through and clarify their opinions on spiritual issues.
- It allows the Holy Spirit to challenge people as they consider the questions.
- It gives us an opportunity to model graciousness and respect in the way we interact with people.
- It helps us to identify who would be interested in talking further.

Whilst doing a questionnaire may not be sharing the gospel, it is certainly an extremely valuable tool in its own right in terms of provoking spiritual interest and hunger. If we are to use a questionnaire we'll need some clarity about why we are using it.

➔ INTRODUCING THE QUESTIONNAIRE WITH INTEGRITY

To have integrity, the way we introduce the questionnaire needs to line up with the reason why we're doing the questionnaire and our actual conduct as we lead people through it. If we're asking someone to do something for us, we need to ask them for what we actually want. If we don't see any value in using a questionnaire and have little interest in what people say, then we will not be able to use a questionnaire with integrity. If this is our attitude to others, we may well find little success in sharing the gospel anyway!

An introduction to use could go something like this "Hi, we're with (whoever you're representing). We're doing a questionnaire about people's spiritual beliefs. Would you have a few moments to help us?"

This is an authentic and honest way to introduce the questionnaire, but the scope of what you've asked to do is limited to the questionnaire. If they say yes, introduce yourself and sit down where possible. Show people the questions before you start. This can help to reassure people because they know what is coming and that the deeper questions later on in the questionnaire don't come as a surprise.

Work through the questionnaire with them. Don't use this as an opportunity to share any of your opinions as you've asked them if you can do a questionnaire, not tell them what you think. If they ask you a specific question, you can note it down and come back to it at the end. You've asked them for their opinions so your aim and objective in the questionnaire is to understand them as clearly and respectfully as you can.

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Often you may be asked why you're doing the questionnaire. Three possible answers are:

1. To better understand what people think about spiritual questions.
2. To learn how to become more relevant and effective in communicating my faith.
3. To give people a chance to discuss spiritual things who wouldn't want to come to a Christian meeting.

This direct and honest approach maintains your integrity and also gives the other person confidence in you as your agenda is explicit. When you get to the end of the questionnaire you can finish by saying "That's the end of the questionnaire, thank you very much for your help." You've now done everything you have asked for permission to do. If you want to carry on the discussion (unless they have asked you a question that you're coming back to) don't without asking further permission.

➔ LETTING PEOPLE GO

Sometimes we can get nervous at this point. If the person we're talking to is not a Christian, we'll naturally want to share more of Christ with them. We can feel we have to "hold on" to the person to talk further and unless we do, they will walk away without us having said what we want to say.

This is a disaster. The more we try to "hold on" to people, the more they will feel trapped and want to leave. Ironically, the very things we may try to do to stop people leaving have precisely the opposite effect to the one we intend. This uncovers an important character issue that we must see clearly.

If we're to build rapport, relationship and trust, then integrity, trustworthiness and the absence of manipulation are crucial. We have to be free to allow people to walk away from the conversation if we want them to remain engaged in a healthy way. This requires at least two things of us:

Firstly, we trust that God is working in their lives. We can go no further with people than God wants to take them with us. If they have come as far as they're willing to come with us, then we must let them go. This doesn't mean that they won't journey any further in the future or with someone else, but if they don't want to talk any further with us, we must honour that wish and let them go.

Jesus uses an odd phrase in the gospels "he who has ears to hear, let him hear". Jesus only engaged the people who wanted to engage with him. He didn't force himself on those who didn't want to hear him. In John 5 Jesus says that he could only do what he saw his Father doing. If someone is unwilling to engage with us, we must accept that and let them go. This is the heart of the father of the prodigal son.

Secondly, we need to be secure in our identity as God's children. If our security, worth and self-esteem are linked to the outward results of our evangelism, then all our ministry will be inherently manipulative and ungracious. We must leave results to God.

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➔ GOING BEYOND THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Some people may not want to continue talking beyond the questionnaire. However if we've done a good job in building rapport, relationship and trust, then most people who have time are very happy and even keen to continue talking. If you think about it, the number of people in the UK who are approached by true believers who they don't know who want to share Jesus with them must be pretty low. This gives us a lot of confidence when talking to people that God is at work in their life and that's why he's led us to talk to them.

Once you close the questionnaire and give them the opportunity to leave the conversation if they want to, you can offer them an opportunity to continue chatting. The questionnaire will often have provoked interest and people will want to talk further. There are a variety of ways to continue the conversation but the key to proceeding with integrity is either to invite them to continue talking or to ask permission to talk further. The more free they feel to say no, the more likely they are to say yes.

Some ways to invite people to continue the conversation or ask permission to share might include the following:

- If they asked an apologetic question earlier you could say: **"you asked earlier about... Would you like to talk further about that?"**
- If they gave an interesting answer earlier go back to it: **"I was interested when you said... Would you mind discussing that a little further?"**
- If they said they wanted to know God personally you could say: **"Has anyone ever explained simply how you can know God personally?... I have a simple outline which explains how you can know God. Would you be interested in looking through it together?"**
- If you've had a great conversation, you could say: **"I've really enjoyed discussing these things, thanks. Would you be interested in talking further?"**
- You could ask: **"Are there any questions you'd like to ask me?"**
- If they said they'd like to talk further ask what they'd like to talk about and offer opportunities.

The questionnaire can be a very helpful tool in opening the door to further interaction. If we build trust and provoke curiosity, we will very often see opportunities that we wouldn't have with a more direct approach. Good questions, gracious respect and careful listening can build a bridge that facilitates deeper interaction.

The important thing in maintaining integrity is not to go beyond what we've asked permission to do without asking further permission or inviting them to talk further. The key thing in building trust is not to be manipulative and to always be ready to allow them to walk away. As we do this we will reflect Jesus himself and we will find people are much more open to respond to the message we want to communicate.