

Questions Internationals Ask

by Terrell Smith, ISM Staff in Madison, WI

International students and scholars huddle around, eager to ask questions or to listen to the responses to other's questions. Some of these internationals are undergraduates, some are graduate students, and some are visiting scholars. What do they ask? What are their questions?

Here are some general guidelines and tips for interacting with internationals.

Guidelines

- Try to ask questions in response to their questions (something Jesus often did) to make them think.
- Then, help them discover the answers to their questions from the Bible. By answering from the Bible, students will learn to look to Scripture for their answers.
- Often a group discussion with a diversity of responses can be more helpful than just one person's response.
- You don't need to give an answer to every question. Listen for the underlying question. For example, "Are miracles possible?" may also be asking, "Is there a God who gets involved with our world?" Once the God question is answered, the miracles question becomes less of an issue.
- Sometimes all they need is a short answer that makes sense or a question to help them get it.
- Use stories. Stories can engage the thought process and stick in the memory. Tell stories from the Bible, stories from Jesus' life, stories Jesus told, other people's



stories, and your own experiences. You can also make up your own stories.

- As you are talking, ask questions and then listen. Pray for God to open the student's mind to understand and their heart to respond.

Here are a few of the questions that I'm asked by internationals on campus, with brief answers.

"How do you know which religion is true?"

This is a very important question, because so much depends on it. "How do you know anything is true?" I reply. "Before we look at the various religions, it's good to have some sort of method for discovering what is true, since all religions make such different claims."

Internationals often respond by saying that truth can be determined using the scientific method, which relies in part on repetition of an experiment to prove a hypothesis. That may be

how we prove something in science, but how do we prove something in life? in history? History is unique. It doesn't repeat itself. For example, how would you prove that you were born?

You have birth documents, witnesses (your mother at least!), and your physical presence. But really, none of these prove that you were actually born—though they offer strong evidence. I may question your written records, saying they are falsified, doubt the truthfulness of your mother, the midwife, or doctor (after all, as interested persons they are biased and have an agenda).

"What's the difference between religions?"

If you take all the religions of the world, you can divide them into three groups: Those who have no God (like

some forms of Buddhism), those who believe in many gods (like Hinduism), and those who have one God (like Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

People in the last group believe that there is one God who made us and is interested in us. Only Christians believe that God loves us so much that he became a human being in the person of Jesus, so that we might know and experience his love. (John 1:1-5, 10-18)

You can also divide all religions into two groups. Most religions require their followers to do things in order to earn something (nirvana, the path of enlightenment, heaven, forgiveness of sins, etc.). Out of all religions, there is only one that says there is good news—you do not have to do something, it is already done. (John 1:10-13; Ephesians 2:1-10)

It does not seem reasonable that God would give forgiveness as a free gift. We want to do something to earn forgiveness.

I like to give internationals a gift, such as a New Testament in their language. Any gift will serve as an object lesson.

Pointing to the gift Bible I gave them, I ask, "Whose Bible is that?"

"It's my Bible."

"What did you do for it to become yours?"

"I guess I need to read it and understand it."

"Have you read it yet? Do you understand it now?"

"No, not yet."

"Then whose Bible is it right now?"

"It's mine. You gave it to me."

"That's right, but that's only half of it. That's what I did. What did you do?"



"I received it."

"What if you try to pay someone for the gift they give you?"

"It insults the giver, you cannot pay for a gift."

"Exactly. If you are given a gift, all you can do is receive the gift and say 'thank you.' Someone else paid for that Bible, you did not. I offered it to you as a gift, and you received it. It is now your Bible, it belongs to you, you can enjoy all the benefits which come with this gift. You have not yet read it, you do not yet understand it, you did not pay for it. That's similar to God's gift of forgiveness offered to each of us. It's a gift. Someone else paid for our gift of forgiveness—Jesus paid on the cross by dying to pay for the wrong things we have done. God offers us forgiveness as a gift. All we can do is receive his gift and say 'thank you.' We say 'thank you' with our lives."

As you spend time with internationals, listen to their questions, and give an answer from the hope that is within you, you will discover the Holy Spirit at work in you and in those you share with. May the Lord give you great joy as you share the good news with internationals who have eager hearts and minds.