

SERVANT

THE BIG QUESTIONS



**THINKING
CLEARLY,
LISTENING
WELL**

DR. ANDY BANNISTER

GLORIOUS RUIN

HOW SUFFERING CAN SET US FREE

**WHAT'S IN
A NAME?**

MARK MAXWELL

**A GLIMPSE
OF GRACE**

STEVE PORR



THINKING CLEARLY, LISTENING WELL

Dr. Andy Bannister

Generating thoughtful dialogue on key questions of faith is the passion of Dr. Andy Bannister, lead apologist and Director of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries Canada. From churches

and universities to TV and radio, Andy regularly addresses audiences on issues with profound implications for life. In the DVD series entitled *Burning Questions* he addresses the things that matter to Christians, people of other faiths and those with no faith at all. Dr. Bannister shared with *SERVANT* his thoughts on how skeptics, seekers and believers alike can learn to listen well, think deeply and follow the evidence where it leads.

Photo by Stephanie Willis

SERVANT: IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE QUESTIONS THAT PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY ASKING AND WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE THEY'RE ASKING?

ANDY: Sometimes, yes. Christians do have a tendency to assume we know the questions people are asking rather than really listening to them. The same goes for the culture: sometimes we think we understand it without actually listening to what's being said, discussed or broadcast. Among the most common concerns that rise to the top are issues like the meaning of life, whether there's more to life than the material, or where true, lasting peace can be found. Perhaps one might sum those up in the bigger question: "What does it mean to be human?" You can't properly address that question without asking the "God question," but if we jump straight to the latter, we'll talk past people.

WHY DID YOU CREATE "BURNING QUESTIONS" AND HOW DO YOU ENVISION IT BEING USED?

We wanted to explore six big questions in an interesting, engaging way, ensuring that we listen as we go to those who don't share our Christian convictions. That's why we talk to atheists, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists: to make sure that when somebody of that worldview sits down and watches *Burning Questions*, they will feel we have been fair in how they've been represented. I hope the series will be used in two ways. First, that believers will invite their unchurched friends to watch it and that it will generate great discussions that lead naturally to Jesus and the gospel. That's why the presentation is structured the way it is, beginning quite broadly and then zeroing in on Jesus as the series progresses. Second, I'd hope this would be watched by Christians keen to learn how to better "give a reason for their hope." It's

perfect for use either on your own or in church small groups, for example.

OF THE SIX QUESTIONS YOU'VE ADDRESSED, WHICH ONE DID YOU FIND THE MOST DIFFICULT TO ANSWER?

Probably the problem of evil and suffering in Episode 3. This issue hits many people at the level of the heart as well as the head, meaning an answer often needs to contain a strong pastoral component—and that's hard to do well in a TV or video presentation. At the same time, I think the problem of evil and suffering is a profound gateway to the gospel. Only the Christian worldview actually enables you to diagnose the problem (unlike atheism, for instance, for which "good" and "evil" don't actually exist but are just personal preferences) as well as describe what God has done about it (unlike a religion like Islam, in which God makes moral pronouncements from a distance but never actually provides a remedy).

ONE OF YOUR TOPICS IS "HAS SCIENCE BURIED GOD?" HOW DO YOU RECONCILE WHAT SOCIETY LIKES TO KEEP AT OPPOSING ENDS?

A great starting point is to observe that there is a huge range of questions that science cannot address. Science is a wonderful tool, but only applicable to a narrow range of topics. Try answering the question "What is a human life worth?" using science alone and see how far you get. Furthermore, the fact that the cradle of modern science was Christian Europe, that the first scientists were often people of deep faith, and that many scientists today profess a belief in God tells you that attempts to play science and faith off against each other are naïve.

YOUR MISSION IS HELPING THE BELIEVER THINK AND THE THINKER BELIEVE. WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICAL TERMS FOR OUR CHURCHES AND COMMUNITIES?

Often it begins by reminding Christians that Jesus commanded us to "love the Lord your God with your heart, soul and mind." Sometimes we have a tendency to focus on the first two and ignore the latter, but we do so at our peril. One of the things we love to do at RZIM is to encourage people to rediscover the Christian mind and to leap with both feet into culture, academia, politics or media and the arts because Christianity stands up very well in the marketplace of ideas.



WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF APOLOGETICS TODAY?

The best apologetics help to remove obstacles so people can see Jesus clearly. It's not about trying to argue unbelievers into faith, but about removing stumbling blocks and showing them that Christianity is credible intellectually, emotionally and culturally.

WHAT ARE THE HAZARDS OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS AND HOW CAN WE AVOID THEM?

Pride and intellectual arrogance. If you begin thinking you can argue people into accepting Jesus, you've gone very, very wrong. I love this prayer of C.S. Lewis:

**From all my lame defeats and oh! Much more
From all the victories that I seemed to score;
From cleverness shot forth on Thy behalf
At which, while angels weep, the audience laugh;
From all my proofs of Thy divinity,
Thou, who wouldst give no sign, deliver me.
Thoughts are but coins. Let me not trust, instead
Of Thee, their thin-worn image of Thy head.
From all my thoughts,
Even from my thoughts of Thee,
O thou fair Silence, fall, and set me free.
Lord of the narrow gate and the needle's eye,
Take from me all my trumpery lest I die.¹**

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE FOR CHRISTIANS WHEN IT COMES TO SHARING WHAT THEY BELIEVE?

There are two things. First, not knowing what the gospel is. We've too often reduced its message to moralism, legalism, politics or pet theologies. If we don't know what the gospel *is*, how can we preach it? And second, fear. Because many of us have grown up in churches where we haven't been taught *why* we believe what we believe, we're afraid to tell people about Jesus in case they ask us a tough question.

Maybe a third challenge would be that many Christians doubt that evangelism works. Deep down we're not sure that it's possible to preach Jesus and see people come to faith. Yet I find that when I explain the gospel in a way people can understand, listen to their questions, gently address them and then challenge them to consider Jesus, many respond. I've just come back from a week-long university mission and I was blown away by the response among students.

HOW SHOULD BELIEVERS APPROACH SKEPTICS AND ATHEISTS?

With generosity, friendliness and compassion. But at the same time, don't be afraid to ask good questions; don't feel you're the one who needs to defend everything. Press your atheist friend a bit on what

they believe. For example, you might ask: "The word 'atheist' tells me what you *don't* believe, but what *do* you believe?" Books like *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller or my forthcoming book *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* are great resources to help you engage atheist friends.

WHAT ENCOURAGEMENT WOULD YOU GIVE TO A DISCUSSION GROUP LEADER OR NEIGHBOR WHO IS STRUGGLING TO SEE FRUIT THROUGH EVANGELISM?

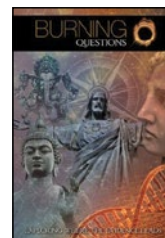
Hang in there, keep praying, keep witnessing and keep asking good questions. Remember that it often takes multiple contact points before a person encounters Jesus. Don't think that just because it wasn't you who led someone to Christ,

you're an evangelical disaster. Indeed, one of the most nefarious lies the enemy likes to whisper in our ears is that we are personally responsible for dragging people into the Kingdom of Heaven. But making Christians is *God's* job. Try to bear that burden and it will break you. Instead, be a faithful witness, explain the gospel as best you can (keep learning!) and trust God with the results.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU'D LIKE TO ADD?

Much of the church in Canada desperately needs to rediscover its evangelistic zeal. Apologetics is a powerful tool to that end, but remember: it is a tool *to an end*. The goal is not to be clever, or to answer every question, or to have read more books than the average person, but to share Christ with clarity, conviction and compassion. I truly believe the fields are not just white, but are getting whiter as more and more young people are now post-post-Christian. They're not rejecting the gospel; they just don't know what it is. What an opportunity, but we need to rise to the challenge, tool up and get out there. |S|

To request your copy of the six-part DVD **Burning Questions** please see the enclosed envelope.



¹ C.S. Lewis, *Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Harvest, 1992 [1964]) 129.