Suggestions on Holding a God Questions Live Question and Answer Panel

General Suggestions
1. **Three Panel Members** seems to be optimal. We’ve tried five, which is too many to keep engaged, and two, which is too few, since it’s most natural for at least two people to respond to each question. If you’ve only GOT two, they both have to respond every time, and that gets monotonous. Having three Panelists enables two to be thinking while one is answering.

2. Live questions are FAR more interesting to the audience than answering questions from pre-submitted sheets or emails.

3. We usually station two people holding microphones in the audience area, one on each side of the audience. While one is holding the mike for the person asking a question, the other is finding the next person who will ask a question and encouraging them to make sure they are asking a question, not making a statement or adding a further answer to something a Panelist has said.

Preparing for the Panel
1. The value of live Panel Discussions: New Song has held 5-6 Question and Answer Panels over the last dozen years. They have all been successful. Everyone goes home feeling like Christianity/the Bible really does have answers to all the questions of life, and this church isn’t afraid to address them all.

2. Recruiting Panel Members: I (Hal) look for articulate, Bible-knowledgeable believers, preferably who have the gift of teaching and some Bible School or Seminary education. I usually ask them about two months in advance to make sure they are available for the projected date, and I ask them to do some preparatory research ahead of time. One month before the Panel, I meet with my two teammates (or call them up) and assign them each certain topics to bone up on: every question in The God Questions book has been asked from the floor during these discussions. The major question that will come up that has been omitted from the God Questions book is the creation vs. evolution question. General Bible knowledge questions will also come up. Assigning out each of The God Questions, plus the evolution question will cover 90% of what will be asked.

   In my church, I have several seminary graduates. I usually recruit a few of these for the panel. If you need outside guests, there is often a Christian college nearby you can draw from. Here in San Diego, we have some Christian research institutes that love sending their people to churches to teach and help with things like this.

3. Learning the Questions Ahead of Time
   We always advertise the Panel to our congregation 2-3 weeks in advance. The week before the Panel, we put a questionnaire in the program asking folks to submit their questions. – This is a terrific way to be prepared! Most of the questions you’ll be asked will be from those who wrote out their question the week before. The questionnaire should read something like, “Next weekend, during the message portion of our services, we will be hosting a live Panel Q and A Session. If you have a question you’d like to submit to the Panel, please write it in the space below and place it in the offering basket this morning.” Be sure to leave a blank for the person to write in their name, but make filling in the name optional, not mandatory. The reason you want to identify folks is because you will receive several very personal questions asking questions like, “I am struggling with ________.” The questions are too personal to answer publicly, but afford a great opportunity for personal counseling the week before the Panel.

Starting the Discussion
1. Someone (usually the primary teacher in the church) should assume the role of moderator by welcoming people, explaining the ground rules, and calling for the first question. The ground rules are usually:  
   - Please ask sincere and honest questions. The goal isn’t to make a statement or stump the Panel, but to delve into areas about God that you’d really like some help.
   - We discourage asking personal questions like, “Do you think I should marry Joe?” Panelists are happy to give personal advice after the service, but the goal of the Panel is to answer questions about God, the Bible, and Christianity.
   - Keep your questions to under 60 seconds. This isn’t the place to make statements, but rather to get answers.

2. Introduce the Panelists and mention something about their background or education that instills trust in their ability to answer well.

3. Getting someone to ask the first question is usually the hardest moment in the service. To prime the pump, we offer a free copy of The God Questions, or some other inexpensive resource, to the first question-asker.

Attitude of Humility
Nothing turns people off more than a know-it-all. Panelists are far more attractive when they say, “I’m glad you asked that, I’ve struggled with that in my own life.” Or, “This isn’t a full answer, but here’s my understanding…” Or, “I could be wrong on this, but…”

   One of the strongest responses I’ve ever seen came when an audience member asked, “What if Christianity is wrong?” I answered, “It might be. We can’t know for sure.” And then went on to ask, “But if we are wrong, what have we lost? I’ll give you some reasons why I believe Christianity is right in just a minute, but first let’s explore the downside: what if it isn’t true?” I then lined out what might be lost by following the teachings of Christianity if it wasn’t true, and what might be gained by following it, even if it wasn’t true. My admission that I couldn’t know for sure was what caused the young man who asked the question to decide to give Christianity a try.
What Makes for a Good Answer

There are four parts to a good answer. These will almost certainly come naturally to the Panelists.

1. **Empathy.** The most important part of the answer is, “I am with you.” “I validate your question, your pain, your inquiry.” People won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. When someone asks a question, make sure they are affirmed, complemented, or empathized with before giving an answer. Begin with phrases like: “That’s a great question!” “I’ve asked the one myself.” “I thinking I know how you’re feeling.” “That must have hurt.” “I am so sorry.” “It took a lot of courage to ask that. Thank you.”

2. **Logic.** People want reasonable answers, answers that make logical sense. This is not a time for “you’ll just have to trust me.” Or, “It’s a mystery, no one knows.” (That may be part of the answer, but there is always some logic to any answer from God, because God is logical.)

3. **Scripture.** Usually when a question is asked, one Panelist will have an immediate thought or answer. While this first person is speaking, the other two should listen to make sure someone quotes or points to one or more passage of Scripture that speaks to the answer. So, if the first answerer doesn’t quote or refer to Scripture, the job of Panelists Two and Three is to make sure they give some Scripture.

4. **An Illustration.** A picture is worth a thousand words. Any time a panelist describes a specific way that question was answered for them, or gives an illustration (rather than just an explanation) which sheds light on how the answer works in real life, those are the best answers. So, if Panelist One says, “God really does care about your suffering.” Panelist Two might add a story about a time when s/he or someone close to them suffered, and how God was there with them in the midst of the suffering.

Note: Be sure you understand the question before answering. About 50% of the time, one of our Panel members will clarify the question with a response like, “If I’m hearing you right, you’re asking…”

Drawing to a Close

1. **Ending the discussion.** Usually once the discussion gets going, there are more questions than can be answered during the time allotted. The moderator needs to keep his or her eye on the time and draw the discussion to a close at the appropriate time. This is usually made easier by saying, “Okay, we’ve got just a few minutes left and time for one more question” (or two more questions.)

2. **Summing up.** After the final question is answered, the moderator should sum up why we’ve spent this time. This could include the following, “I’m so glad we’ve had this time today. Our goal was to answer as many questions as possible and let you see that God, Christianity and the Bible really do have answers to just about every question you might have. If you came this morning just investigating Christianity, I hope this has been a helpful step in your faith journey. I encourage you to come back next week as we’ll continue to build faith by (describe next week’s service). For some of you, you’ve had questions for a long time. Maybe your questions were answered today. If so, here’s your next step. (Describe placing one’s faith in Christ, and offer a pray opportunity to do that right then.)

3. **Giving an invitation.** If the moderator or someone on the Panel feels confident enough, you may want to reserve 4-5 minutes at the end for something like this, “So, we’ve looked at Christianity from several angles today. One question everyone asks at some point in their life is, “Is it true? Is Christianity really true? Is it trustworthy?” According to the laws of our court, an argument is proven true not by removing every shadow of doubt, but by removing reasonable doubt. Doubt, by its very nature, is part of faith. Today we’ve looked at the historical evidence for Christianity. Does history have enough evidence for you to conclude that Christianity may be true? We looked at archaeological evidence. Did that leave you with reasonable doubt, or point you towards Christianity? We looked at what the Bible said about itself, we looked at prophecy, we presented some logic. We’re never going to fully remove doubt from anything, just like there’s always a slight chance that when you sit down on a chair, it might collapse under you. But what’s reasonable? Where, in your mind, does the preponderance of evidence fall? Does it fall on the side of Christ and Christianity, or does it leave you with sufficient doubt to conclude that the truth of the universe probably lies elsewhere? I think, if in your mind, the truth points reasonably towards Christianity, that you ought to take a step towards Christ today. Here’s how you can do that. I’m going to pray a simple prayer, and if it expresses what you’d like to say, then you say in your heart, ‘Lord, that’s my prayer.’

“Here’s the prayer: ‘Lord Jesus, I believe You are real, so I am expressing faith in You today. I ask You to come into my life. Be my Leader, forgive my sins.’ If you prayed that prayer…” (Give assurance of salvation and suggest next steps — like returning next weekend, or reading the Bible, or telling someone about your decision.)

4. **Offering an alternative prayer.** In situations like these, after I give the opportunity to receive Christ, I give a second, less-committal opportunity as well. I call it “the Seeker’s prayer.” I’ll say, “That prayer may have been more than you can express today, so I want to give you another opportunity. Some of you just aren’t ready. You still have some questions. I hope you’ve seen today that God is big enough to hear and answer your questions. So I encourage you to pray this prayer: ‘God, if you’re real, show yourself to me. God, if you’re real, I want to know you.’ Put the ball in His court. If you pray this prayer sincerely, the Bible’s promise is that you will find Him. It says, ‘You will seek me, and you will find me when you seek me with all of your heart.’ So I’m going to pray that prayer right now, and maybe you’d have the courage to pray it with me. Here it is: ‘God, if you’re real, show yourself to me. God if you’re real, I want to know you.’

Following the Seeker’s prayer, you’ll want to encourage them to keep growing; to introduce themselves so the dialogue can continue; to take home a Bible and read the book of John to investigate Jesus’ life for yourself.
End the Q and A Service with the Offering

In any service where you give people a chance to make a faith-response, it’s helpful to leave the offering until the end. That way you can ask them to mark their decision on their Welcome Card and put it in the offering. You can then follow them up during the week.

Close as usual with a benediction, and an invitation to return next week. (Service clubs like Kiwanis and Rotary often spend 1/3 of their meetings forecasting the next meeting, even though members are required to come each week. Tell them why they ought to return next weekend.)