

How to Ask Good Questions in a Community Group

1) 10 principals for asking good questions

1) This is a discussion, not a test

In a test, the examinee attempts to decipher what the test question wants to hear as the right answer. This does not facilitate the kind of sharing/discussion we are after. Test-type questions imply a hierarchy where the teacher knows more about the subject than the students – this may be true. We need to ask questions that allow others to think for them-selves and not be afraid of a wrong answer.

There is a difference in review questions and discussion questions. Rule of thumb: Discussion questions normally look for information members of the group have but the leader may not have. “What do you think?” “What feelings does Jesus’ statement provoke in you?” “What contrasts do you notice in this story?” As opposed to: “What five contrasts does Jesus make in chapters 12-15?” Which is more clear if you have had time to study, but not so clear if you have not.

2) Avoid leading the witness

Often we are trying to get the group to a conclusion and it becomes easy to ask questions that nudge them down that path and limits their response to a predetermined set of answers: “Does this passage make you feel angry or glad?” This type of question puts words in their mouth and should be avoided. Instead, you can ask, “What feelings does this passage provoke in you?”

3) Ask questions one at a time

“How does the lack of forgiveness affect the one who has done harm, the one who has been harmed, and each person’s relationship with God?” If you hear this question for the first time, it will be overwhelming, and no one will try to answer it. Simply split these up into three different questions.

4) Make questions accessible to everyone

There are several ways questions can be asked that limits the number of people who will be able to understand the question and respond:

4a) Multiple clauses:

“Since eating meat sacrificed to idols might be confusing to a person who doesn’t know that idols are nothing, and since eating meat in temples might inadvertently involve one in idolatrous worship, what is Paul’s advice to the strong Christians in 1 Corinthians 8 regarding meat?” This question has too many clauses. Your question should be simple and clear. Please try to avoid questions with multiple clauses.

4b) Technical:

“In 1 Cor 7, how does Paul apply an eschatological hermeneutic to our process of decision-making about relationships?” This question is appropriate for a seminary level class but it is not appropriate for most small groups. Ask questions that your group can answer. Please try to avoid technical questions.

5) Avoid being vague

Vague questions lead to vague answers and usually confuse people. You know you are asking a vague question when people ask you questions of clarification like, “What do you mean?” “What are you asking?”

We ask vague questions when we don’t have a clear understanding of a given passage. The first step to asking clear questions is to have a clear understanding of the passage. The next step is to follow the principles in this pager.

6) Try not to always have the last word

Discussion works best when people are talking with each other about the topic. The facilitator does not always have to have the last word. This will generally discourage a discussion, because it exalts the facilitator’s opinion over the opinion of the rest of the group. An expert can do this in a teaching setting but a facilitator is not an expert and a small group is not a teaching session. The goal is to facilitate a discussion not teach a lesson. Consequently, when a discussion has ended it is often best to say, “Good comment!” “Your brilliant!” or “I like that!” Then move on.

7) Keep questions simple

“What does it mean to the way we live that humans are members of the family of God?” might better be asked, “How do you think being members of God’s family should affect the way we live?” Simple questions don’t dumb down the discussion; they make the discussion accessible to everyone.

8) Ask open-ended questions

In case you haven’t noticed, “No” and “Yes” answers are not so great at starting a conversation. “Do you identify with the disciples in this passage?” This is a closed-ended question. “In what ways do you identify with the disciples in this passage?” This is an open-ended question.

9) Help people talk to each other

This is the heart of facilitation vs. leading/lecture. A good question gets people talking. When you ask a good question you will find yourself listening more than talking.

10) Have clear understanding of the passage

There is just no way to ask a good question if you don’t really understand the passage. You have to schedule time for study throughout the week to understand a passage. Please don’t try to read a passage one time and then write questions. If you don’t have time to study your passage then don’t try to

teach on it. Instead, focus the lesson on a passage you do have a strong understanding of.

II) Four kinds of questions you should ask

1) Icebreaker questions (Storytelling questions)

The goal of icebreaker question is to get people to tell their story. When everyone has a chance to tell a little piece of their life story the group builds trust and will be more likely to engage in the group discussion. At the beginning of every lesson the leader needs to ask an icebreaker (storytelling) question.

Principles for asking storytelling questions

1a) A good storytelling question should invite at least a one-sentence response.

(No) "What town did you grow up in?"

(Yes) "Tell us one interesting fact about the town you grew up in."

1b) Ask questions that move from less vulnerable to more vulnerable. Going too deep too fast scares people off.

(No) "What is the most embarrassing moment in your life?"

(Yes) "What is one thing you're good at?"

1c) Ask questions that everyone can answer.

(No) "Tell us about your father?" Some people may not have a father.

(Yes) "What emotion or image comes to your mind when you think of the word father?"

1d) Ask questions that are more positive than negative.

(No) Tell us about the worst vacation you have ever had?

(Yes) Tell us about the best vacation you have ever had?

Examples of storytelling questions

"Who was God to you when you were a child?"

"What has been one of the best compliment you have received?"

"What does (Easter, Christmas, New years) mean to you personally?"

"Ten years from now, what are three words that you hope people will be able to use to describe you?"

"What do you like about your job?"

"If you inherited ten thousand dollars, what would you do with it?"

2) Observation questions

Observation questions answer who, what, when, where, why and how. It is hard to have a discussion of a passage without having some of these questions answered by the group or by the leader.

Types of observation questions

2a) “Who are the characters in the Story? Who is the writer of the book? Who are the recipients of the letter?”

2b) “What are the most repeated words or phrases in the passage? What are the main events? What action verbs are used? What happens to whom in this passage?”

2c) “When does each event take place?”

2d) “Where do the events take place? Does it all happen in one place, or is there movement from one location to another?”

2e) “Did the author tell us why this event took place?”

2f) “Did the author tell us how this event was possible? Did the author tell us how this works?”

Principles for asking observation questions

2g) Only ask observation questions that are central to understanding the main point of the passage. Most observation questions are boring because they end up being random facts that don't go anywhere. This means that you need to have a clear understanding of the passage before you can start asking questions.

2h) Ask observation questions that lead into application questions. This gives your application questions purpose. For example:

(*Observation question*) “What strange thing does James tell us to have joy over? (James 1:2)”

(*Answer*) Trials of many kinds

(*Application question*) “What trials are you going through right now?”

3) Interpretation questions

The meat of a discussion about a text concerns its meaning. Sometimes the meaning is obvious, but often we need to dig for it. Batting around the possible interpretations of a key sentence or the possible explanations for a character's behavior is part of the fun of discussing a text.

Types of interpretation questions

3a) What does it mean? A basic all-purpose interpretation question takes this form. For example, what does the author mean by _____? What does Paul mean by “resurrection”? How does he explain it in the passage?

3b) How is it significant? Some form of this question will follow most observation questions. For example, why is this description significant?

3c) What's the point? When Jesus told a story, He did it to drive home a single important point. You might ask; what point is Jesus making in the parable of the mustard seed?

3d) How are they alike? How are they different? Like repetition and key words, comparisons and contrast are important clues to the meaning of a story or argument. For example, what comparisons does Paul make in this passage? What are all the differences between flesh and spirit that Paul mentions here?

3e) What's the cause? What's the result? Sometimes the meaning of a passage has to do with cause and effect. For example, why do you suppose David doesn't punish Amnon? What are the results of this decision?

Principles for asking interpretation questions

3f) In a Bible study it is helpful to ask interpretation questions when the group has built trust and are not new to the faith. If the group does not have trust or if the group members are new to the faith it is often helpful to just state what you think the best interpretation to the passage is. If someone wants to explore your interpretation they should have the freedom to do so. The Bible can be hard to interpret at times. To ask a new believer to correctly interpret a passage when they have never done this before can be awkward at best and embarrassing at worst. Consequently, it is not always necessary to ask interpretation questions in a Bible study especially when the passage is notoriously difficult to interpret.

3g) Observation is about fact. Interpretation is often about opinion. It is not helpful to ask opinion questions when you are trying to interpret a passage. Try not to ask questions like; what do you think this means?

4) Making principles

After a passage is properly interpreted it is helpful to develop principles to help bridge the passage from its historical time period to now. A principle is a statement of truth that God is communicating to all people of all times everywhere through a given passage of Scripture.

Principles for making principles

4a) Principles are universal. They must be appropriate for all people of all times. For example, "The Pharisees opposed Jesus." Is not a principle because it is a historically bound statement. Instead say, "People will always oppose the message of Jesus." This is no a historically bound statement, it is a principal.

4b) Principles need to reflect the same main point that the passage of

scripture itself is emphasizing. Lets use the passage that says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." A bad principle for this passage looks like this, "In order to really love other people, we must first love ourselves." This is a true statement, but is not what the passage is talking about. A better principle for this passage looks like this, "We are called to love others unselfishly."

4c) We should try to avoid finger pointing in the wording of principles. "You should give willingly." This principle exalts the teacher over the listeners. Instead say, "We should give willingly."

4d) We should try to avoid figures of speech in our principles. Figures of speech often need to be interpreted and make the principle hard to understand. For example, don't say, "God's eye is upon us through the storms of life." This is true but a clearer ways to say it is, "God provides for us during difficult times."

4e) We should use simple, uncomplicated sentences in stating principles. For example a bad principle is, "Because God is in sovereign control over his entire created order, he governs the most minute details of our lives." This principle is too long and complicated. A better principle might be, "God oversees every detail of our lives."

5) Application questions

After stating a culturally relevant principle that accurately reflects the point of a given passage, it is time to move onto some application questions. The Bible is not only concerned about changing our thinking, it is concerned about changing our behavior as well. Consequently, application questions are a necessary part of every Bible study. Many of what we call application question can also be called "now what?" questions. That is, after explaining the passage application questions seek to answer the question, now what?

Principles for asking application questions

After making a universal principle the application question brings that universal principle back to our local specific context. For example, if our principle is "Love others" we might ask, "What does loving others look like if I am a college student at UTC?" "What is a good way to love others if I work in a cubical 10 hours a day?" "What would loving others look like if I just yelled at my roommate or spouse?"

III) Example Lesson From James 1:1-8

(Icebreaker question) What do you normally do when you get frustrated? What do you wish you would do when you get frustrated?

(Transition) Lets read James 1:1-8.

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

Trials and Temptations

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,^[a] whenever you face trials of many kinds, **3** because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. **4** Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. **5** If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. **6** But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. **7** That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. **8** Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

(Facilitators comments) The letter of James is written by Jesus' half brother "to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations."

(James 1:1).

- "the twelve tribes" is a reference to Israel and so the letter is addressed to Jewish Christians.
- "scattered among the nations" is a reference to Jews that never returned to Israel after the exile and instead settled in other lands.

(Observation question) What strange thing does James tell us to have joy over? (1:2)

(Principle #1) Trials are normal when you are a follower of Jesus.

(Facilitators comments) James 1:2 implies that his audience is undergoing some serious trials and James is writing to encourage them so that instead of having their faith be undermined, their faith can be strengthened.

(The next four application questions are based on principle #1)

(Application question) In your opinion, how do most American's think about

trials?

(Application question) How does James challenge a normal American view of trials?

(Application question) What is one trial or difficulty that you have faced this week?

(Application question) How might God be at work to make you stronger through this trial?

(Facilitators comments) James transitions from trials that produce joy in our lives to prayer.

(Observation question) What does James say someone who asks God and then doubts the answer is like? (1:6-8)

(Principle #2) Our trust in the goodness of God makes our prayers effective.

(The next two questions are based on principle #2)

(Application question) Tell the group about a time you prayed and were certain that God would answer, but it seems like He never did?

(Application question) Tell us about a time you prayed for something that wasn't answered and later found out it would have been terrible if God had said, "Yes" to your prayer?

The principles and general information in this paper was taken from "How To Ask Great Questions" written by Karen Lee-Thorp.