

Learning to Ask Good Questions

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When I led my first freshmen Bible study in my dorm, I assumed that the key to leading an effective Bible study was possessing the “right answers.” Consequently, I studied hard so that I knew all the “answers” to the passage we were going to discuss. Over time I began to realize just having the “right answers” was not enough. I began to see that fruitful conversations about the Scriptures were often related to asking the right *questions*.

I also began to see this principle played out in evangelistic conversations with college students. When objections to the Christian faith would arise, I always assumed that the key to addressing them was possessing the “right answers.” Over time I began to see that effective “apologetics” was not primarily about offering compelling answers but asking captivating questions.

Today I am convinced that the key to leading fruitful Bible Studies rests not in our ability to articulate good answers but in our capacity to ask good questions. This does not mean we do no homework to prepare. On the contrary, it means that we have not finished our homework until we have thought carefully about how to engage our audience with carefully crafted questions.

One of the things that is striking about Jesus’ interaction with people is the way he continually asks questions—questions that zero in on heart underlying issues. Notice how Jesus responds to a question about his authority with a question of his own that cuts to the heart of the issue:

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?” Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. (Matt. 21:23-27, NIV)

Learning to ask good questions is one of the most important skills you can develop. The ability to ask good questions applies not only to leading Bible studies but evangelism and discipleship as well. Like other skills, it can grow over time through practice and evaluation.

We want to encourage you to cultivate the skill of asking good questions as you lead small groups. *The Ultimate Road Trip* (especially chapter 8) contains some helpful advice to point you in the right direction.

Five Types of Questions

In the process of leading a small group, you will employ a wide variety of questions. You will ask questions that help participants see important details in the text. You will ask questions that encourage participants to wrestle with the meaning of the text. You will ask questions that encourage participants to consider the

significance of what they have read. You will ask questions that help participants discover the big idea. Ideally all of these questions should prepare people for the application that is the goal of your study. The table below describes and illustrates the kinds of questions you will employ in your study.

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| <p>Launching</p> | <p>Launching questions help introduce your study by connecting the topic discussed in the passage to their world.</p> | <p>Imagine for one week if someone who knew little or nothing about Christianity was to follow us around and watch the ways we express our Christian faith. If, after a week, we were to ask this person, “What do you think the Christian life is all about?” what might he (she) say?</p> |
| <p>Observation</p> | <p>Observation questions help participants observe important details in the passage. (Note: An observation can be answered directly from the text.)</p> <p><i>“What does it say?”</i></p> | <p>If you were to ask Paul what the characteristics of true Christian are according to Phil 3:3, what would he say? How would you describe Paul’s tone in Phil 3:1-10? In Phil. 3, how does Paul describe his life prior to knowing Christ? In Phil. 3, how does Paul contrast his life prior to Christ with his present life in Christ?</p> |
| <p>Interpretation</p> | <p>Interpretive questions help participants wrestle with the meaning of the passage.</p> <p><i>“What does it mean?”</i></p> | <p>What does Paul mean when he speaks of “putting confidence in the flesh” in Phil 3? Why did Paul regard his previous religious accomplishments as “dung”?</p> |
| <p>Summary</p> | <p>Summary questions help participants capture the main points of the passage.</p> <p><i>“What’s the big idea?”</i></p> | <p>What did Paul want to make sure these believers understood about the Christian life by telling his story in Phil 3? How would you summarize Paul’s understanding of the “gospel” in light of Phil. 3:7-11?</p> |
| <p>Application</p> | <p>Application questions lead participants to respond to God through his Word. Keep in mind that your goal in teaching the Bible is not merely to communicate principles but to lead others to respond to a person (Jesus Christ). In the context of leading people to respond we want to ask questions that surface their sin condition and point them to Christ.</p> <p><i>“How should I respond?”</i></p> | <p>How does Phil. 3 challenge you to think differently about the Christian life? Paul discovered that all the things he deeply treasured were rubbish compared to knowing Christ. How are you tempted to center your life on something other than Christ? Is Christ most often an “end”—the object of your enthralment and interest—or is Christ a “means”—someone who is pursued to get you something else? Why is this the case?</p> |

Practice with Questions

Review the categories of questions from “Learning to Ask Good Questions,” then choose a category for each question below (Observation, Interpretation, Summary, Application, or a combination of).

These questions are drawn from Cru.Comm “Model Purity” (1 Thess. 4:1-12)

1. In v. 3-6, the goal of spiritual growth in the sexual area is expressed in three “that” statements. What are they?

2. Which of these does your heart long most to experience: A desire for beauty, to get outside of ourselves, acceptance, intimacy, satisfaction, love? _____
3. How can you cultivate coming to Christ for your deepest needs? _____
4. In vv. 6-8, what further motivation to remain sexually pure do you see here? _____
5. In v.8, why do you think Paul adds the parenthetical phrase “who gives you his Spirit?” _____
6. In the area of sexual purity, what the most helpful thing someone has shared with you? _____
7. Read 1 Thess 4:1-12.
 - a. Where are the two occurrences of the phrase “more and more” found? _____
 - b. What does this tell you about Paul’s primary purpose in writing these words? _____
8. The Greek word for “abstain” (ESV/NAS) or “avoid” (NIV) in v.3 has the idea of “to hold back, keep off, be distant, to be away.” Which of these English translations seems better? _____

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷ For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

⁹ Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, ¹⁰ for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, ¹¹ and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, ¹² so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. 1 Thess. 4:1-12 (ESV)

Questions from Ephesians 2:1-10

OBSERVATION: Paul provided a comprehensive portrait of the Ephesian's former death in sin, following the course of the world, the prince of the power of the air, and the passions of the flesh.

- **Fail:** *What about this passage reminds you of World War Z? How should that make you feel when you are too lazy to do evangelism?*
- **Terrible:** So many things can come in and mess up the lives God wants us to have. *Which thing in this passage seems to nail exactly who people are in our society, which is so far away from what it means to be people made in His image?*
- **Warmer:** I count 7 bad things about the Ephesians in 2:1-3. *What are they?*
- **Good:** *What words and phrases did Paul use to describe their lives prior to Christ?*
- **Better:** *How did Paul paint a bleak picture of the Ephesians' past?*

INTERPRETATION: Notice there is a shift of pronouns between v. 2 ("you") and v.3 ("we"). This is a *significant, interpretive* point: you see that all of humanity—even the Jews—not just Gentiles, shared in the same dead condition, expressed in their disobedience and desires.

- **Bad:** In 2:3, Paul drops himself into the passage and shows that he wants the Ephesians to know he's just like them. You see that he's good with ministry because he wants to connect with his audience. *What does this mean for the people hearing this letter for the first time, especially for those who are unchurched?*
- **Good:** *What is the significance of Paul switching from "you" (vv.1-2) to "us" (v.3)?*
- **Better:** *From vv.1-3, how do we know that all unbelievers (Jews and Gentiles) share the same spiritual condition?*

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. Eph. 2:1-3 (ESV)

SUMMARY: Death characterizes the spiritual state of the (Ephesian) believers in 2:1-3.

- **Bad:** This passage is so depressing. *Do you ever feel like you're not doing well even when you think you might be, but something just isn't right in your head? Do you know what I'm talking about? People tell you to be careful. How do you guard your own heart when your mind tells weird things?*
- **Not any better:** Its obvious Paul knew the Ephesians weren't perfect. *Do you agree?*
- **Okay:** *Which concept best encapsulates 2:1-3: "dead in sins" or "children of wrath?"*
- **Better:** *If you had to pick one word to capture vv. 1-3, which would it be?*

APPLICATION (Fallen Condition): Being discouraged by a lack of change in my life or struggle against sin, being seen in habits, addiction, character flaws, moral purity, etc.

- **Disappointing:** *Are you still dead in your sins?* Answer honestly, because liars go to hell (Rev 21:8).
- **Still bad:** *Describe a Christian leader or pastor that you know who has had an affair?*

- **Good:** *Knowing we are not yet perfected in this life, how are tempted to revert to “the passions our flesh?”*
- **Better:** *How are you grieved, seeing sin’s influence in your life and desires?*

APPLICATION (Redemptive Solution): God’s same power that raised Christ from the dead and triumphed over spiritual powers and authorities is still operative in me, because we are the handiwork of his new creation.

- **Nope:** In 2:10 we read that we are God’s workmanship. *Does this mean that God takes away our freewill when we are “created in Christ?”*
- **Good:** *How does the reality of being made alive and raised together with Christ bring hope and joy to your heart?*
- **Better:** *How have you seen Christ’s resurrection power at work in your life over the past several months?*
- **Even better:** *How does it make you feel to know that God loved you at your worst?*

APPLICATION (Life Application): I want them to learn how to live out of a rich experience of the gospel that flows from a proper understanding of what God has done for them.

- **Appalling:** We all need help; we’re so messed up. *Where can you get grace when you feel like you are one of those zombies in World War Z, chasing Brad Pitt?*
- **Not too bad:** *What area of your life are you praying for God to bring newness and transformation?*
- **Good:** Read Paul’s prayer in 3:14-19. According to Paul, *what does it look like to experience the Gospel in our lives?* Imagine this prayer answered in your life. *What would experiencing his grace more deeply look like in your life?*

LAUNCH (surfacing the fallen condition):

- **Painful:** *What was your last near death experience?*
- **Not any better:** One of our Bible study leaders gets drunk after Cru. *Do you know who I’m talking about?*
- **Ok:** *Have you ever known someone who battled an addiction? How did they talk about their struggle?*
- **Better:** Recount a difficult situation or unfortunate circumstances that you felt powerless to change. *What was happening?*

Asking Christ-Centered Questions