

Learning to Ask Good Questions

by Keith E. Johnson and Rhonda Johnson

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We use and answer questions every day. Asking good question is sometimes difficult and is an art, but, as someone in the Word with others, it is a skill worth mastering if you want to help them discover the truths you've uncovered in Scripture. This article offers some practical categories and examples for leading others into thoughtful and insightful discussions.

When I (Keith) led my first freshman 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.

For me (Rhonda), I also saw this play out in my discipleship relationships. During my early years of discipling women, I would have handouts galore and try to think about all that I could say. What was really needed so often in those times was not my insights or "answers" but some thoughtful questions and good listening. When I asked the right kinds of questions, then I could see clearly what they needed and where they were struggling or wanting help, or those questions could offer a sweet place of support. Coming into ministry with the mindset of being a good question-asker is a significant skill to add to your toolbox!

We are convinced that one of the most important keys to leading fruitful times in the Word rests not in our ability to articulate good answers but in our incorporation of good questions. Of course, we must still prepare and do our homework in Scripture, but our goal is to help those who are in the Scriptures with us discover what we discovered when we studied the passage.

A striking thing about Jesus' interaction with people is the way he continually asked questions. His questions went to the heart and not only surfaced brokenness and sinful patterns, but also revealed

who He was more clearly. Notice how Jesus asked a few penetrating questions that gave the disciples (specifically Peter) a chance to state who they saw He was in Matthew 16:13-17 (ESV).

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples,
"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"
14 And they said,
"Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."
15 He said to them,
"But who do you say that I am?"
16 Simon Peter replied,
"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
17 And Jesus answered him,
"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah [Peter]! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven."

Learning to ask good question is one of the most important ministry skills you can develop, whether you are leading Bible studies, doing evangelism or discipling someone. Like other worthwhile skills, you will grow in your ability to ask, edit, and write good questions through practice and evaluation.

Four Categories of Questions

As you lead others in the Word, you will want to utilize a wide variety of questions.

- **Launch questions.** A solid launch question will link the gap that exists between them and their brokenness to the passage's provision, revealing their need for God's Word in their lives. It should set them up to want to see what God has to say about that area.
- **Explore questions** (Observation, Interpretation, and Summary). When Explore questions are well-written and crafted, they will lead someone to see what God said and what implications were there for the original audience. All three of these types of explore questions (Observation, Interpretation, and Summary) are a look backward at the author's words to his original audience. Thus, the verbs will all be in the past tense and pronouns will be in the third person.

- **Observation questions** will help

participants notice details from God's Word by looking down at the passage for answers.

- **Interpretation questions** will help them look up from the passage to ponder and wrestle with the meaning of those truths they saw.
- **Summary questions** will help them synthesize portions of thought and discover the big idea of a passage.
- **Connect questions** invite general reflection on truths from the passage that apply both to the original audience and to the modern one. They are a space where you offer them a chance to see enduring principles and truths about who God is, who they are (both fallen and redeemed) and what the gospel is.
- **Application questions** are the goal of the time you've spent in the Word after doing the work of answering explore and connect questions. Gospel change is where the study of the passage meets the participant's story. Note that there are **three kinds of application questions** you can ask. Your goal should be that they will leave the time in the Word convicted by their sin and led to worship God and his provision for them. This goal is a softened heart that wants to walk with God is coupled with hands and feet that take practical and measurable steps toward godly living.

The table on the next page describes and illustrates these kinds of questions you might employ in your times in the Bible. [All the example questions were pulled from the Sample Discussion Questions from Titus 3:1-11]

TYPES OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Launching	A launch question helps introduce your time in the Word by connecting the topic discussed in the passage to their world.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where have you witnessed a harsh exchange over social media in the last year, either as a participant or a bystander? What happened?"
Explore: Observation	<p>Observation questions help participants note important details in the passage and can be answered directly from the text.</p> <p><i>"What did it say?"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What list of things did Paul tell the Cretan believers to avoid doing in v.v. 1-2 and 8-9? What did he tell them to do? • What repeated ideas were in 3:1-11?
Explore: Interpretation	<p>Interpretive questions invite participants to wrestle with the meaning of the passage.</p> <p><i>"What did it mean?"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why would those reminders in v.v. 3-7 have motivated the Cretan believers to obey? • How would the passage be different if v.v. 3-7 were missing?
Explore: Summary	<p>Summary questions help participants capture the main points of the passage.</p> <p><i>"What was the big idea?"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What main points were taught about good works in 3:1-11? • How would you summarize the big idea of this passage?
Connect	<p>Connect questions offer participants a chance to reflect on theological truths that endure and are not tethered to a context.</p> <p><i>"What truths does this teach for all believers?"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the role of good works in the lives of believers? • Verses 3-7 are a beautiful picture of what God has done for his people. What do these verses highlight about who God is and what He has done?
Apply	<p><i>How should I/we respond?</i></p> <p>Fallen Condition Application Questions should surface their fallen condition, leading them to identify AND feel conviction from Scripture.</p> <p>Redemptive Solution Application questions should point them to the grace God provides. These questions are God-centered and turn their eyes to see and reflect on Him.</p> <p>Response Application questions are practical and measurable. They lead the participant to do something that is tangible. Personal response is about what you individually will do. Corporate is about what a group you are part of will do.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being gentle is a lost art. With whom have you been harsh lately and why? What negative consequences were there? • God's goodness and loving-kindness appeared and saved you. Reflect on that. How does the appearance of God this way lead you to respond to Him? • <i>(personal)</i> Social media is one of the places where it has become a cultural norm to express harsh, argumentative and even abusive ideas. What are 2-3 things you could do to stand against that norm? • <i>(Corporate)</i> What are 5 things our Cru movement could do to be gentle in our social media interactions?