

# Asking Questions *(Getting them to feed themselves)*

As a small group leader, your job is to help others discover truth for themselves. Don't tell them something that they can figure out for themselves if you were to ask them the right question. Never tell when you can ask. You always having the right answer is not the most important thing.

## a. 10 Principles for Asking Great Questions

### 1. This is a discussion, not a test

A test is a situation in which the person asking the questions knows all the right answers, and the responder's task is to give the right answers. Test questions are fine in high school algebra class or in the oral exam for a doctoral candidate. Test questions are useful when your goal is to see if people can parrot back information they have memorized such as in a foreign language class. However, when either spiritual growth or sharing among peers is a goal of your group, test questions can cause problems.

Fact-finding questions make a small group discussion feel like a test:

*Who are the primary characters in this story?*

*How did the jailer respond after the earthquake in Acts 16?*

*Where was Jesus born? vs. Why did Jesus have to be born in Bethlehem?*

A disguised test question may ask for mind reading:

*What five key features of the sanctified mind does Paul describe in Romans 8?*

A test question may ask people for information not currently available to them:

*What does Paul mean by the term flesh in Ephesians 2:3?*

A test question may ask people to defend themselves:

*Q: What do you think Paul means by saying we were dead in our sins?*

*A: I think he means...*

*Q: Why do you say that?*

"What do you think" is a perfectly respectable way to ask a question. It asks for information that the responder has and the questioner does not have. However, "Why?" as a follow-up question can make people fear you think their answer was defective. We need to explore ways of probing for more information without placing people on the defensive.

### 2. Avoid leading the witness

If you've watched much TV courtroom drama, you know that attorneys often lead witnesses because it is to the interrogator's advantage to make the witness say what he wants the jury to hear. You also know that leading the witness usually causes the opposing attorney to object. A small group leader or classroom teacher may want the group to get at some information they think is important. These questions put words into the responders' mouths. But being committed to a question-and-answer format causes questions like:

*Don't you think that not taking the Lord's name in vain includes being careful about saying, "God told me"?*

*In what ways are you like the Pharisees in this passage?*

*Does this passage make you feel angry or glad?*

**3. Ask one question 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 read that question a couple of times, you could probably take it apart and answer it piece by piece. But if you only heard it, you'd have forgotten the first part by the time you heard the last. It's best to ask just one simple question and wait for responses before asking the next piece.

**4. Make your questions accessible to everyone**

Keep questions simple enough that everybody has a reasonable chance of knowing what you mean the first time you say it. Jesus' questions were always simple. Even so, nobody ever felt He was asking a question that was beneath his or her intelligence. Keeping the cookies where people can reach them doesn't require us to talk down to them. The simplest questions are usually the most profound.

*"Since eating meat sacrificed to idols might be confusing to a person who doesn't know the 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 I Corinthians 8 regarding meat?"*

Technical terms can also leave people in the dust:

*"In I Corinthians 7, how does Paul apply an eschatological hermeneutic to our process of decision-making about relationships?"*

**5. Say what you mean**

It's easier to say what you mean when you keep a question simple. It's often a good idea to go back over a list of questions and ask yourself, "Is this what I mean to ask?"

*What does Pilate say when Jesus starts talking about truth?*

It's okay to ask someone to quote the text before I ask them what the statement means. But perhaps it will be more economical for me to observe what Pilate says and ask the group what he means:

*When Pilate says, "What is truth?" what do you think he's asking Jesus? How would you put his question in your own words?*

**6. Take the direct route**

Again, simplicity rules. When formulating your question, be on the lookout for common detours like unnecessary clauses, irrelevant background and double negatives.

*Why does it not make sense to not rely on the Spirit of God rather than on the flesh?*  
Really means:

*Why does Paul think it makes more sense to rely on the Spirit than on the flesh?*

**7. Ask open-ended questions**

*Q: Do you identify with the disciples in this passage?*

*A: Not really.*

“No” and “Yes” are not great conversation starters. A person can answer yes or no without even engaging his brain. By contrast, an open-ended question compels people to be attentive to the facts of a text or situation or to think carefully about the meaning of the facts.

*Are there seven key words in this paragraph? vs. What key words do you notice in this paragraph? (Leads the witness and asks merely for a yes or no answer)*

**8. Help people talk to each other**

It's easy for a guided discussion to focus on the leader. The leader asks a question, and one person answers. The leader asks another question, and another person answers. Everyone looks at the leader and talks to the leader. In a healthy group, people talk to each other. The leader asks a question, someone responds, and someone else responds to what the previous person said. They look at each other. If people are not automatically talking to each other, then ask questions that prompt people to talk.

**9. Pay attention to details**

Some people like to leap immediately into discussing what a passage of the Bible or a chapter of a book means to them personally without examining what it says. Such discussions can quickly lose sight of the topic or passage you're studying. It is during these times that you can directly ask the person, “What does the text say?”

**10. Don't lose sight of the big picture**

Since the forest is as important as the trees, encourage those in your group with questions that:

- summarizes what a paragraph, a chapter, a story, or a psalm is about
- understands the original historical context of a passage and explains it clearly
- points out similarities between our modern world and the ancient world addressed in the text
- keeps the small group focused on its objectives and goals

## b. Question Types

- Synonyms  
*Can you think of another word for “grace?”*  
*What is another way of saying “living sacrifice?”*
- Definitions  
*What is your concept of the word “Lord?”*  
*What do you think the term “laborer” really means?*
- Differences  
*What is the difference between praise and thanksgiving?*  
*What do you think is the difference between “fear” and “anxiety?”*
- Similarities  
*How are “light” and “purity” alike?*  
*In what ways is the written Word like a seed?*
- Opposites  
*What is the opposite of truth?*  
*What are the opposite traits to these characteristics we have listed?*
- Relationships  
*How do you think patience is a part of claiming the promises of God?*  
*What is the relationship between “pride” and “being teachable?”*
- Examples  
*What are some examples of two being better than one?*  
*What are some biblical examples of impatience?*
- Why  
*Why do you think the word “race” is used in Hebrews 12:1?*  
*Why do you think an attitude of thankfulness is important?*
- Explain  
*What is the meaning of the 2 Timothy 3:16 diagram?*  
*How would you explain a Christian’s spiritual immaturity if he is in an excellent church?*
- Extremes  
*Which of these attributes of God do you think most exalts Him?*  
*Which of the six elements of The Wheel do you think is most important for you?*
- Quantity/Quality  
*How long-range can our understanding of God’s will be?*  
*How important is the eyewitness element of the biblical record?*

- How  
*How do you think we sharpen one another as Christians?*  
*How can we press toward the future and still live in the present?*

**c. Group Exercise**

Write 2-3 questions that reflect upon the Psalm 19:7-14 passage