

Asking Better Questions in Small-Group Discussions

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There's a lot to be concerned about when leading a Bible study or small group. The group may be inconsistent in attendance. They may be slow to open up to one another. They might ask questions about the Bible that you don't know how to answer. But there's one thing most leaders dread more than anything else.

Silence.

After reading a passage of Scripture, you ask a question. Then there's nothing. Nada. No one says anything. You awkwardly take a sip of your coffee while everyone looks down at the Bible, shifting uncomfortably in their seats. You wonder to yourself, *What went wrong?*

I've been in many such settings (sometimes as the one leading) and usually, someone jumps in and mercifully answers the question, bringing palpable relief to the leader.

The good news is we can grow in our ability to ask better questions. Here are four types of questions that can hopefully help stir up discussion in your small group Bible study:

Warm-Up Questions

In addition to an icebreaker-type question (which can be a simple way to get to know one another), I like to begin with a "warm-up question" to transition the group before we dive into the passage. It sets the stage for the topic you'll be studying and gives a moment for everyone to shift their focus.

Warm-up questions are broad, but with direct point. Everyone in the group doesn't need to answer, but they're the type of question that everyone should be able to answer, even if they haven't read the passage.

For instance, if the general theme of a passage was about our need for God's mercy a warm up question might be, "Can anyone remember a time in childhood when you got caught doing something wrong? How did you feel or respond when you were discovered?" There are multiple ways people respond to being caught—shame, confession, guilt, hiding, lying, blaming others—so the warm-up discussion sets the stage for discussing our need for mercy (and the ways we sometimes act as though we don't need it).

Since I like to keep things on theme, the icebreaker I'd ask (just for fun) before the warm-up question would be something like this: "If you were caught with your cookie in the cookie jar, what kind of cookie would you be hoping to pull out?" Relating the icebreaker and warm-up question to the overall theme helps the group focus as they begin to study the passage.

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Google Map Guidance

One thing I appreciate about Google Maps is that when I ask for directions, they provide multiple ways to get to my desired location. When attempting to craft good questions, consider asking questions your group can answer in multiple ways.

For instance, the question, “What Bible stories in either the OT and NT illustrate God’s mercy?” will most likely invite a variety of answers from multiple people. Take a moment and answer that question right now in your own mind. Hopefully, you could answer with multiple stories from Scripture that highlight God’s mercy. If *you* can think of multiple answers to your own question, then most likely your group will be able to as well.

In contrast, the question “How do we know God is a merciful God?” might produce a more limited response. Most of the answers will focus on Jesus’s death for our sin (which is clearly the prime example of God’s mercy). It’s not that the second question is particularly bad, it just probably won’t produce the same level of group participation and connection throughout all of Scripture.

One important key to this type of question—not only do you need to have multiple routes, you need to know where you’re taking your Bible study group. Facilitating a small-group discussion doesn’t mean the direction of the study is up for grabs. Knowing where you’re heading as you’re studying will help you ask questions that keep your group moving forward in their understanding.

Houston, We Have a Problem

In some passages of Scripture, a lack of clarity may cause either confusion or misapplication. It’s important to anticipate these potential problems. For instance, [1 John 2:3](#) states, “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.” A misapplication of this text would be: “The only people who are believers are those who no longer sin.”

One way to address misunderstandings is to allow the group to chew on and discuss the potential problem together: “If someone were to say to you that this verse means that believers never sin, how would you answer them in light of other passages in the Bible? What verses help bring clarity to our interpretation of this verse?” By inviting them into the potential problem, the group learns how to discuss and debate God’s Word in a healthy manner that fosters engagement with the text and one another.

Achilles Heel

Sometimes when preparing to teach a passage of Scripture, you may say to yourself, *Well, I hope no one asks me about _____.*

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That's probably the *exact* question it's most important to research and consider. Call your pastor or ministry leader and ask for help, or find a good commentary. And, then, once you've done your homework, ask your "Achilles Heel" question to the group.

And, when someone asks a question you didn't think about (and have no idea how to answer), I find it helpful to say something like, "Wow, that's a great question I hadn't considered. Let's discuss it as a group. How would you all answer Anne's question?" After talking it through together, it can serve as a good homework assignment: "Let's all research this question, and we'll look at it again next time we meet."

Sometimes in our wrestling with the toughest questions we learn how much we have to learn. That's a good thing—it helps promote our growth and understanding. It also keeps us curious as we read and study Scripture.

I've learned so much from others as teachers and leaders wisely ask good questions. It may take a little more prep time, but the earlier efforts pay off during the Bible study. Most people won't even notice the work you've done. But they'll know Scripture better as you ask questions that engage the heart and mind. And that's the ultimate goal.