

# Questions that Spark Discussion

Knowing how to ask good questions is one of the key elements of a successful small group. Questions are what transform a small-group lesson from a lecture into an interactive experience—which should be our goal as group leaders.

I began to give serious thought to this subject a number of years ago after reading Karen Lee-Thorp's [How to Ask Great Questions](#). The book inspired me to follow these eight guidelines when writing and asking good questions, and they have served me well.

## 1. Good Questions Create a Conversation

And they create those conversations without putting anyone on the spot. You don't want your small-group members to feel like they are in school, taking a test. You also don't want a scenario where you are the learned teacher asking all the questions, and your group members are under pressure to know the "right" answers. There's nothing healthy about either learning situation.

In contrast, some of the best discussion questions solicit input from everyone present. The best example of this is to ask people what they think. There is no wrong answer to the question, "What do you think?" For example, "What do you think Jesus means when he says, 'Sell your possessions'? Was he talking to you and me? What's your opinion?"

Of course, as a leader you will sometimes know what the Bible actually teaches about this—you're not supposed to be void of knowledge or opinions. But you want to gently steer the group toward to answer Jesus gives. Allowing people to discuss questions and process the answers themselves improves their rate of retention. It's also a good idea to remember that your knowledge or opinion may not represent the full scope of a passage or verse.

## 2. Good Questions Focus on One Thing

Make sure your questions are focused and clear. Here's a poor example of how to address a topic: "What did Jesus mean by 'You are the Light of the world,' how did his disciples respond, and how should we respond today to this statement?" Instead, break those questions down to make them more clear and focused:

- What did Jesus mean by "You are the light of the world"?
- How did Jesus' disciples respond to his announcement about being the light of the world?
- How should we respond today to Jesus' statement?

Rather than asking a multi-layered question, it's best to ask just one simple question and wait for responses before asking the next thing. Well-focused questions also serve as a tool to keep bringing the group back around to the subject at hand. Small groups are notorious for getting off the subject, and clearly worded, pin-pointed questions help you avoid this problem.

### **3. Good Questions Can Be Understood By Everyone**

Keep the questions simple enough so that everyone has a reasonable chance of knowing what you mean the first time you ask it. So the following won't work very well: "In light of the current theological debate about millennial views, which is prevalent in many seminaries and other places—many books having been written about this from the premillennial, postmillennial and amillennial positions—how do you think we should respond to this debate in the church, in our homes, in schools, and in our government?"

It would be much better to ask, "How much should we care about the end times?"

### **4. Good Questions Say What They Mean**

Let's say you're studying 1 Corinthians 11—specifically, the passage about women wearing head coverings. It's not a good idea to ask, "Is Paul saying something true here?" This is the Bible, after all—of course he's saying something true! It's better to ask, "Is Paul saying something here that applies to women today?" That may seem like a subtle difference, and it is. But it shows how important it is to be intentional when writing discussion questions.

### **5. Good Questions Are Open-Ended**

A person can answer "yes" or "no" without engaging his or her brain. On the other hand, an open-ended question compels people to think about the facts of a text or the situation. We utilize this principle in everyday life. Over dinner, if I say to my children, "How was school today?" they will respond "Fine." And we're done. But if I say to them, "Tell me something interesting that happened today at school," they have to focus on a specific incident, and I can get them talking. The same applies in group discussions.

### **6. Good Questions Involve Emotions**

There is more to studying the Bible than intelligence, and there is more to discussing the Bible than intellect. Group leaders need to involve people's emotions, and questions are a great way to do that.

Some good examples are:

- How do you respond inwardly to these claims Jesus makes?
- How do you feel about these teachings on love?
- How do you react to that truth?

### **7. Good Questions Deal with People's Interests**

Sometimes it's good to connect a Bible study question with the current interests and passions of your group members. Not every time, of course, but sometimes. Here are some possible examples: "Dave, you've been a college athlete. How do you react to Paul saying, 'I buffet my body daily'?" "Several of you have read the *Left Behind* series. How do you think it lines up with what John is saying here in Revelation?"

### **8. Good Questions Are Sometimes Answers to Other Questions**

In any small-group setting, people usually direct questions to the group leader. Even if you've done a good job of establishing that you are a co-learner and don't have all the answers, people will still direct their questions to you most of the time. So in response, it is often a good idea to answer their questions with a question of your own. Like: "What do you think about that?" or "Does anyone here tonight have ideas about that?"