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How to Ask Stimulating Discussion Questions

Practical advice for one of a group leader's most important roles

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Peter, a member of my small group, recently accepted my challenge to lead four consecutive lessons. Two of them were as dry as a bone, while the others stirred exciting discussion. What was the difference? Peter's questions. In all four lessons, he listened intently, called individual members by name, and was careful not to dominate. On only two occasions, however, did he use questions that stimulated participation.

But this principle doesn't apply only to Peter. Often the difference between effective group discussions and the type that fizzles into embarrassed silence has to do with the type of questions the leader asks. As you train your mind to identify and prepare stimulating, open-ended questions, your small group will soar. The people will leave edified and will make plans to return next week.

Closed Questions vs. Open Questions

During the two sub-par meetings, Peter focused entirely on the Bible passage. We covered the book of Jonah, so Peter asked, "Where did Jonah flee?" "To a ship bound for Tarshish," a member replied. "Great answer," said Peter. "Anyone else?" Silence. "Why did Jonah flee?" asked Peter. "Because he was disobedient," said another member. Peter tried to get more people to talk. "Would anyone else like to share?" A few mumbled a variation of the same answer, but when all was said and done, there was only one answer: Jonah was disobedient.

Peter listened well, gave positive feedback, and did everything right. What more could the group say? There was basically only one answer to give. Jonah fled because he was disobedient. Someone might have added a few more adjectives like, "Jonah was gravely disobedient," but why bother? Even a superb, highly trained leader couldn't elicit more discussion from the question. Peter could have waited in silence for an hour, hoping for someone else to talk, and we'd have sat there in silence with him.

I talked to Peter a few days later. I shared with him my own failures and discoveries—especially in the area of asking questions.

Fortunately, something clicked in Peter, and the next lesson was excellent. We covered Psalm 46:1, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." Peter began with a few closed, observation questions to help us understand the biblical text. But this time he quickly applied the passage to our lives with questions like, "When was the last time you had a crisis? How did you handle it?" Peter followed with another application question, "How did God become a refuge in your life through your crisis?"

Everyone had something to share. "Many years ago I administered the most successful tailoring business in the country," Paul began. "I loved my job and even made suits for the President. At the height of my success, the doctors told me it was either my health or my job, so I had to leave it. But God. ... "

Then Carol shared, "Recently, my daughter Mary said she'd be home at 10 p.m., but at 1 a.m. she still hadn't arrived. I'm a nervous person anyway, but this time I was beyond myself. Through prayer, God began to. ... " Our group shared deeply that night. We bore each other's burdens. We came away edified, encouraged, and eager for more.

Preparing the right questions before you start the meeting can give you assurance that the discussion will be lively and dynamic. Closed questions have only one correct answer. When a leader uses too many of them, he positions himself as a Bible expert who's trying to

discover the brightest, most biblically literate students.

Open-ended questions, on the other hand, elicit discussion and sharing. There is more than one right answer. Open-ended questions stir cell members to apply biblical truths to their own lives.

Preparing Dynamic Questions

Let's look at an example from the familiar passage in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Observation. You could start out with a closed observation question like: "How did God demonstrate his love for us?" The answer lies within the text. In this case, you're simply asking the people to observe and answer what they see in the verse. Even someone who has never read the Bible could answer the question: "God demonstrated his love by sending his Son."

It's great to include a few observation questions in the beginning of the lesson. Such questions will help your members better understand the meaning of the Bible passage.

Interpretation. You could go one step further and ask your group members to interpret what the verse means. But for the most part, this is still a closed question. For example, you could ask, "What kind of love did God demonstrate?" Some might talk about God's sacrificial love; others might refer to God's fatherly compassion.

The leader might be ready to talk about the Greek word *agape*, which refers to Christ's self-sacrificing love on the Cross. While there is room for a few such interpretation questions to better understand the Bible, this is not the goal of the cell group. If you use this type of question too frequently, your members will leave with lots of knowledge but little transformation in their own lives.

Observation and interpretation questions help us understand the Bible, but for the most part they're closed questions. They reach the head but not the heart. They can provide useful biblical information, but they'll generate little interaction.

Application. Let's look at an open-ended application question covering John 3:16. You could say, "Describe your experience when you first understood that God loves you." You could then call on one of the believers in the group: "Susan, would you share what happened when you first experienced God's love for you?"

This type of question/exhortation takes the well-known verse in John and invites members to apply it. Many will share. You could also ask a question like, "How did you come to know God loves you? Did someone talk to you about God? Were you alone in your room? Share your experience."

Grab the Heart

Make sure you grab the heart during the cell lesson. Don't allow your people to leave the group without having applied the Bible to their own lives. I know of one cell leader who likes to conclude the Word time by saying, "In light of what we've read and discussed in this passage, how do you think God wants to use this in your life, or in the life of this group?"

I recommend, as a minimum, one application question for every two observation or interpretation questions.

Christian A. Schwarz and his team from the Institute for Church Development in Germany have proven that direct application to immediate needs makes the difference between an effective and an ineffective small group. They analyzed responses from 4.2 million people, from more than 1,000 churches in 32 countries. Schwarz concluded that successful small groups must be "holistic small groups which go beyond just discussing Bible passages to applying its message to daily life." In such groups, members are able to bring up those issues and questions that are immediate personal concerns.

Aim at Transformation

Every lesson should give people something to feel, to remember, and to do. The goal of the cell group is to transform lives, rather than take in knowledge. For this reason, it's great to remind cell members about last week's challenge and determine if anything significant happened.

The leader might start the lesson time by saying, "You'll remember that last week we discussed 1 John 3:16–17. Let me read these verses again" Then ask, "Can anyone give a testimony about performing an act of kindness to someone during the past week?"

Just wait in silence for a few moments. If no one shares, at least they'll know you're expecting transformation from the cell lesson, rather than mere Bible knowledge. If you begin the lesson each week by asking how people acted on the previous lesson, the members will begin to look for ways to apply the lesson. This calls for vulnerability in your own life, as well. If you failed to act on last week's lesson, admit it. People will appreciate your honesty.

Explain the Passage Clearly

Although the lesson is based on questions, the members must understand the general context of the Bible passage in order to answer them. In other words, don't sit in silence for an hour waiting for a response! If group members don't understand the question, their puzzled faces will reveal it. Perhaps the confusion occurred because they don't understand the biblical context. In the minds of the hearers, the question appears in thin air with no concrete base.

I recommend, therefore, that the leader initiate the cell lesson by explaining the general context and meaning of the passage. The leader might use closed, observation questions to clarify the meaning, but normally it's helpful to give a brief explanation of the passage.

Also, keep in mind that there's no excuse for sloppy, superficial Bible study. Some leaders erroneously think that lessons based on open-ended, participatory questions don't require as much preparation time as monologue Bible studies do. Wrong!

Limit Your Questions

One of the most common errors in cell agendas is including too many discussion questions. Some cell leaders feel obligated to cover all the questions—even if there are ten or more. In reality, a good Word time has three to five questions. If cell leaders try to cover more than that, the extroverts in the group will dominate the meeting.

My advice is to allow the people to leave with a hunger for more, rather than a commitment never to return to such a long, boring cell meeting. I also think it's important to leave time for prayer after the cell lesson. It's best to reach a crescendo of deep sharing that naturally leads to deep praying.

It's the Questions

It's the questions, cell leader. Just maybe, the lack of participation in your cell group is the result of too many closed-ended questions rather than your skills as a small-group leader. Before becoming too discouraged and deciding that you lack communication skills, examine the types of questions you've been using. Begin to make sure you include open-ended application questions toward the beginning of your cell lesson, and watch your cell group come to life.

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