

Fuzz-Busting Discussions

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"If it is possible to be misunderstood, you will be." That's advice C. S. Lewis gave to aspiring writers. His concern for clarity is just as appropriate for Bible teachers and small group facilitators.

This article continues the "Effective Discussion" series that I started over a year ago in the Quarterly. Here the focus is on one characteristic of effective discussion questions. They're clear. When group members hear your questions, they understand your intent and know what you're after.

As you prepare a Bible discussion, put yourself in the Reeboks of your group members. Will they understand the vocabulary in your questions? Does your wording presume too much biblical or theological knowledge on their part? Can you insert a shorter word for the long one? Have you inspected questions for haze or ambiguity? Have you tested them on your spouse or a friend to see if the intent is clear?

Also be on the lookout for three foes of clarity. If you spot the following kinds of questions in your lesson plan, tell them to scram.

I. "What-About" Questions

One type of question that always drops a dark veil over group members' thinking begins with the words, "What about ?" It's a common way to launch a question in casual conversations. (What about the prayer request you mentioned last week?) But never allow "what about" to trespass into the domain of Bible study questions.

Suppose I'm teaching Matthew 4: 1 -11, the record of Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. I ask, What about the fact that Satan quoted Scripture in his confrontation with Jesus? Their logical reaction? A shrug of their shoulders. And a question of their own. "Well, what about it?"

Whoever poses that particular question may be on to something important. Perhaps the leader wants to explore what Satan's use of Scripture implies about him. If that's the case, here's how to stimulate thinking on the issue: "What is significant about Satan's use of Scripture?"

II. Run-On Questions

Also rein in the impulse to fling back-to-back questions at the group before seeking a reply to the first one. One question at a time! I can't think of a valid exception to that axiom. A review of research on questions delivered in college classrooms echoes this pointer. William Wilen and Ambrose Clegg, Jr. concluded, "A major source of ambiguity is the use of run-on questions. In this case two or more questions are asked in an uninterrupted series and the students do not know which question the teacher wants answered."

These Bible questions on Matthew 4: 1 -11 will grease the rails for learner participation ... if you don't pronounce them in the same breath: Based on the preceding events in Matthew 3, at what point in the earthly ministry of Jesus did this temptation episode occur? And why did Satan pick this particular time to launch his attack?

III. Long-Winded Questions

Another nemesis of clarity is the long-winded question. A good discussion facilitator trims the fat off an overweight question until it is lean enough to appear in a Slim-Fast commercial. Once again allow me to tap the rich vein of research on teaching. Factors that enhance or hamper learner participation in the classroom have been identified. Joseph Lowman says that a skill essential to eliciting discussion is

Wording the query appropriately Experienced instructors ... keep their queries short and

By Terry Powell

COLUMBIA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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simple. There is an inverse relationship between the number of words in an instructor's probe and the length of subsequent student comments. If students must work to decipher your question, they are less likely to respond to it.

Which question on Matthew 4: 1 -11 gets your vote for less complicated?

Since we see the devil in action tempting Jesus in the wilderness, what specific qualities and strategies of spiritual warfare that he will also use against us does he demonstrate?

Or...

What do we learn about Satan from this incident?

A sure-fire way to prune the clutter from questions is to precede them with introductory remarks. facts we stuff within the probe itself are more easily assimilated by learners when we put them in declarative form. The following question is too long and cumbersome:

In light of the way Jesus responded to each of the three temptations by saying, "It is written, "what principle about succeeding in spiritual warfare can we learn from Him?

Instead, put the necessary facts in the form of statements. Then use a shorter, easier-to-grasp question:

Look again at the verses recording Jesus' response to each temptation. On each occasion He employed the phrase, "It is written." What insight about handling temptation did He model for us?

There's yet another way to cover facts that serve as a foundation for questions. Set the stage for interpretation by posing an observation question.

Observation: What did Jesus' responses to the three temptations have in common?

Then...

Interpretation: What insight about handling temptation did He model for us?

Do some of your students stick Post-It notes to their foreheads that read "Closed for Repairs"? Make sure you're not to blame by catering to clarity. Plain, easy-to-grasp English is a feature of questions that pry open the human mind.

Terry Powell
terryp@ciu.edu
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