

Improving Your Questioning Skills

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To question well is to teach well. In the skillful use of the question more than anything else lies the fine art of teaching: for in it we have the guide to clear and vivid ideas, and the quick spur to imagination, the stimulus to thought, the incentive to action.

Whether you're a pastor, a missionary, a youth director, or a volunteer in your church's Sunday School, you occasionally ask questions in the context of group Bible studies. But how effective are your questions? When you pose a question, do learners' eyelids get stuck at half-mast? Does mental fog clog the arteries of interaction between you and group members? Does their participation degenerate into a pooling of ignorance? Or do your questions provide a searchlight for their investigation of God's Word?

If you employ the three basic kinds of questions, and keep a critical eye on how you word them, your questions will hit bull's-eye most of the time.

I. Lubricate Your Lessons With OIL

Remember the three basic types of Bible study questions by using the acrostic **0-I-L**:

A. Observation. Also called "factual," the answer to this type of question is observable in the Bible text without having to analyze the data. You ask observation questions to familiarize them with passage details and to set the stage for interpretation. Imagine you're preparing a Bible study for adults on Mark 5:1-20, Jesus' encounter with the Gerasene demoniac. Here are a few observation questions you might use.

- What were the effects of demon possession on the man?
- What words/phrases in verses 1-13 show Christ's superiority over Satan?
- After the exorcism, how did the man show gratitude?

B. Interpretation. Often labeled "analytical," this type of question requires a deeper level of thinking. Learners mull over the facts of the passage and identify timeless truths or principles. In a narrative such as Mark 5:1 -20 YOU lead them to discover truths that are illustrated by the action. Note the following examples:

- What traits did Jesus demonstrate in this incident?
- What is significant about the fact that the demoniac "bowed down before" Jesus (v. 6)?
- From the man's response to Jesus in verses 18-20, what can we learn about personal evangelism?

C. Life-related. A "life-related" question either seeks illustrations of truths uncovered in the Bible text, or shuttles group members toward the ultimate goal of application. The following questions could help you build a bridge connecting the events of Mark 5:1-20 to the contemporary lives of your learners.

- How is Jesus' superiority over Satanic forces relevant to us in the 1990s?
- What Jesus has done for us may not seem as dramatic as an exorcism. Yet He has changed our lives, too. If Jesus were commanding you to "report what great things the Lord has done for you" (v. 19), specifically what would you say?

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II. Watch Your Wording

A frequent cause of discussion breakdown is poorly-worded questions. A robust Bible discussion depends on the following guidelines.

1. Limit your use of questions that call, for just a "yes" or "no" response. To stimulate more interaction, revise questions that begin with "Do ... Did," "Was," "Were," "Is," and "Are." In Mark 5:1-20, don't ask, "Did the unclean spirit recognize Jesus?" Instead, ask: "How do we know the unclean spirit recognized Jesus?"
2. Avoid observation questions that call for extremely obvious answers. Who wants to respond when the answer is apparent to everyone in the room? Such questions usually require respondents to parrot back a phrase or a fact from a single verse. instead, strive for factual questions that require them to collect data from a group of verses. Poor example from Mark 5:1-20: In verse 7, what did the demoniac say to Jesus? Positive example: What various reactions did people in the region have to the miracle?
3. Trash questions that require historical background or contextual information that the average person doesn't know. If they need this information to understand your text, use lecture, But stick to questions that they can answer by observing, analyzing, or applying the passage you're studying.
4. Check your study questions for haze or ambiguity. By reciting your questions aloud, or testing them on a spouse or friend, you can avoid vagueness. One type of question that always drops a dark veil over students' thinking begins with the words; "What about ... ?" Suppose I ask, "What about the fact that the unclean spirit begged Jesus not to torment him? Your logical response is, "Well, what about it!"
5. Scrap questions that lead to speculation about the text instead of investigation of it. Why spend time wondering about a fact that God didn't choose to reveal? "Why do you think Jesus gave the demons permission to enter the swine?" is a question I would not ask. No matter how long they pore over the passage, learners won't find an answer.

To trim the fat off lazy thinking, ask a combination of observation interpretation, and life-related questions. Then put the questions under your mental microscope and evaluate their wording. Also pluck the following resource off the shelf at your local Christian bookstore: Leading Bible Discussions, by Nyquist and Kuhatschek (InterVarsity Press). Or contact me and I'll whisk you a handout packet that covers the discussion method in more detail. (For your free packet, write to Terry Powell, Columbia Bible College, Post Office Box 3122, Columbia, South Carolina, 29230).

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