

Good Questions

Have Groups
Talking

Josh Hunt



Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the people who helped me proofread
this E-book, including

Chris Sanchez

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Introduction

Question and answer is widely regarded as an effective way—if not the most effective way—to lead groups.

But, ever been in a bad discussion? Ever been in a *really bad* discussion? A discussion that was awkward and uncomfortable or predictable and boring or so tense you wanted to leave the room? There is a reason many teachers will retreat to the safety of lecture. Question and answer is unpredictable. We feel out of control.

Why do some questions spark lively and life-changing conversations, while others fall flat? That is what we seek to uncover in this book.

How do we ask questions that lead not only to an interesting discussion, but one that changes lives? How do we create conversations that create disciples?

Many teachers don't know how to ask good questions. They ask questions that are too easy: "According to John 3.16, who died on the cross for your sins?" and they wonder why no one responds.

Or, they ask questions that are too difficult: Does anyone know what Calvin taught about this passage?

They ask questions that are too personal: What sins have you committed that you are ashamed of?

Or, questions that are not personal enough. They are bland, lifeless, and unconnected to reality.

People like to answer questions that are on the edge. They like to answer questions that are on the edge of their knowledge. They like to answer questions that they think they are the only one who has the answer to.

People like to answer (and hear answers about) questions that are on the edge of personal self-disclosure. Not too much or we get uncomfortable. But personal enough that it is real. Good questions get us to that edge.

People like to answer questions that connect to real life. Not theoretical stuff; real life. They like to talk about stuff that matters—stuff that matters to them in their world.

Asking good questions is more of an art than a science. I could (and do) write twenty or twenty-five questions that you could use in class to lead a lively discussion. But, to make

the questions really sing, you need to understand about the art of asking good questions.

This book will walk you through a dozen types of questions that can be used to stimulate life-changing conversations. It is not an exhaustive list and every good question does not fall neatly into one of these categories. But, understanding how to use these twelve questions will give you the basic tools you need to lead a life-changing conversation.

The jump-ball question is particularly tricky to execute. It is, in a way, the heart of the lesson and what makes the lesson really come alive. If executed well, it will produce a lively discussion on the edge of argument. But it is almost impossible to know what question is going to work for what group. It is nearly impossible to write a universal jump-ball question that will work with all groups. Jump-ball questions nearly always have to be nudged slightly in one direction of the other in order to get the group to bite. But, I think we are getting ahead of ourselves now.

The goal of this book is to equip the teacher to effectively ask good questions that will result in lively, interesting, and on-task conversations that produce changed lives.

Why are good questions the best way to teach adults?

There are basically three ways to teach adults:

- Lecture
- Fun and games
- Question and answer

Lecture is a good method, especially in certain special circumstances.

- If you need to communicate a **good deal of information quickly**. Lecture can be a very efficient way of communicating.
- If there is **only one person in the room that knows the truth**. Group life should not be about the pooling of ignorance. I have seen groups fish for the right answer for days when there is just one person who knows. Say it.
- In **short bursts**. Every lesson ought to have some lecture. In my online lessons I will often put footnotes to the teachers and say, "Preach a little on that." Every lesson ought to have a bit of the prophetic voice of someone saying, "Thus saith the Lord!"
- If the material is somewhat **complex** one voice will often make it clearer than a group of voices discussing.

- If you only have an **expert** in the room for a limited amount of time. I remember hearing Dr. Curtis Vaughan speak one time in El Paso, TX. Dr. Vaughan taught me Greek in seminary and I have an enormous respect for his knowledge. I remember people asking a question about a word that was completely out of context and off the top of his head he would say, “On page 1232 of Kittel, volume 4, it says. . .” Anyway, at this meeting in El Paso, he gave his presentation, then opened it up for discussion. Discussion? Dr. Curtis Vaughan is in the room. I don’t want to hear us dummies speak. I want to hear Dr. Vaughan. Let him lecture till the cows come home!

There is a place for lecture, but lecture has its limitation, especially in a group setting. I can think of two primary limitations of the lecture method.

Lecture is an extremely difficult method.

If you take up piano, you will learn that some songs are more difficult to play than others. If you ever play cards you know that some hands are more difficult to play than others. If you take up golf you soon realize that some courses and some holes are much more difficult than others. The lecture is an extremely difficult method to perfect. If you disagree with the thesis of this book, that Good Questions are the best way to

teach adults, allow me to gently warn you. If you choose to lecture, you are dealing yourself a very difficult hand to play. It is extremely difficult to present a forty-five minute, interesting and life-changing lecture each week. Extremely difficult. Let me invite you to humbly consider the fact that you might be boring people. Do you have anyone in your life who would tell you? Most people will be polite. There is a chance—a good chance—that if you adopt the lecture method each week that your group is bored and won't tell you.

I know what you are thinking. “Not me. Other people might be boring, but not me.” We all fall victim to a tendency to evaluate ourselves more highly than is warranted. Even pastors who preach on humility fall victim to this tendency. Ninety-percent of preachers describe themselves as above average. One hundred percent of teenagers think they are above average. There is a good chance you see yourself as above average. Be careful. Romans 12 warns us not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. It is very difficult to teach an interesting, life-changing lesson every week if you use primarily lecture. You might be boring.

Lecture doesn't do a lot to create community.

Even if you do get it right and your lectures are interesting, stimulating, funny and life-changing, there is still a problem.

Lecture does not stimulate relationship-building.

It does not create community. It does not allow us to get to know one another.

Church is not just about getting to know God and learning to live the Christian life individually and privately. It is not just about a vertical relationship with God. It is also about a horizontal relationship with one another. Lectures don't help us do that much. Conversations do.

The truth is, we need both lecture and conversations. But we get lecture in the worship service. We get lecture in the sermon. Group time is about relationship building. It is about community. Discussion based teaching helps us do that.

David Francis, head of Sunday School for Lifeway Christian Resources, told me that according to their research, in most churches Sunday School is not a small group time at all. It is a mid-sized group time. It is a stand-and-deliver-a-lecture time. It is sit-in-straight-rows-and-listen-to-a-talk. It is mini-sermon time.

If this is true, it follows that many believers have never really experienced group life. They have experienced sit-in-straight-rows-and-listen-to-a-lecture, but they have not experienced group life. They have not experienced one

another life. The skillful use of good questions helps us create group life.

Relationships are about conversations. Good questions create conversations. Good questions make class interesting. Good questions stimulate life-change. Good questions create community.

Fun and games have limited usefulness with adults
By fun and games I mean everything from watching a video to acting out a drama to cutting pictures out of magazines to listening to songs to taking a field trip. It is everything we do that is creative and unusual.

Some of this is great. Variety is the spice of life. It makes group life fun. . . to a point. But, I think you can do too much of this with adults. Too much and adults get to feeling like, “Where is the beef?” I am not sure that kids would ever feel this way, but adults will.

Admittedly, this is rarely a problem. It is rarely a problem that groups are too creative, too lively, or too much fun. But, my point is that these creative elements make a good garnish for the lesson, but a poor entre.

I remember attending a retreat once where the leaders had us listening to secular songs and comparing the theology of

these songs to what we understood to be biblical theology. They had even printed out the words to make it easier for us. It was fun for a while. It was interesting and helpful for the first song or two, but we did this for an hour or more. After while, I got to feeling, like, “Does anyone around here have a Bible? Any chance we could open the Bible and read a bit and talk about what it means to us and how we could apply it to our lives?”

I think most adults are this way. We are O.K. with doing some creative activities. Some. Some creative activities. We will go along for a time. But, after a time, we want someone to open the Bible and get into it.

Good questions strike a happy balance between lecture and fun and games

Good questions have groups talking. Good questions are interesting. Good questions challenge the way we think. Good questions challenge the way we live. Good questions guide us off the broad way into the narrow way. Good questions challenge our assumptions. Good questions help us get to know one another. They test our knowledge. They create community. Good questions are the best bread-and-butter way to teach adults.

There is a place for lecture. When an expert is in the room we do well to lecture. In short bursts lecture can be effective. But not too much.

There is a place for creative activities. There is a place for the unusual. But, enough is enough.

Good questions are the core, the centerpiece, the meat and potatoes of good teaching in a small group or Sunday School class.

The First Five Minutes

The beginning sets the tone for the whole. Like Scott Peck's classic beginning line of *The Road Less Traveled*, "Life is Difficult." We wanted to believe it was easy, or you could make it easy, or easier in three easy steps.

Or, Rick Warren's beginning line of *The Purpose Driven Life*, "It is not about you." That gets to the heart of the matter, doesn't it?

Or how about this beginning line: The beginning sets the tone for the whole.

Well, I don't suspect this book will become a classic on par with *The Road Less Traveled* or *The Purpose Driven Life*. I just want to make the point that the beginning sets the tone for the whole.

The first five minutes of your group time sets the tone for the whole. People tend to make up their mind about how they are going to feel about class in the first five minutes and then spend the rest of the hour trying to defend why that idea is right.

“The first five minutes” can be taken two ways and we will deal with each one separately:

- The first five minutes when people walk into group, and
- The first five minutes when the actual group time begins

Both of these times are extremely important. The first we will deal with in this chapter, the second will have a chapter of its own.

The first five minutes when people walk into the group
When was the last time you walked into a group as a stranger? Do you remember how it feels? Do you remember how it feels to not know where to sit, what to do, where to go, who is in charge, what is going on?

If it has been a long time, or maybe you cannot remember, I recommend you visit another church. If you want to be really brave, visit a church that is not part of your denomination, a church that is very different from yours. Walk in and get in touch with what it feels like to be a stranger.

You might think this issue is not important enough to warrant going to all this fuss about. Jesus counted the issue of strangers and how they are treated as very important. It is one of the things that separate the sheep from the goats.

Circle the word “stranger” every time it occurs in this passage:

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” Matthew 25:34-46 [NIV]

Imagine Jesus visited your group. How would you treat Him? Jesus taught us to treat every visitor that way, because how we treat them is how we are treating Him.

The writer of Hebrews taught us that by being careful of the way we treat strangers, we are, at times, entertaining angels: Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:2 [NIV]

How we greet one another is elevated in the Bible to the position of a command. Four times in the New Testament we are commanded to greet one another properly:

- Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings. Romans 16:16 [NIV]
- All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet one

another with a holy kiss. 1 Cor. 16:20 [NIV]

- Greet one another with a holy kiss. 2 Cor. 13:12 [NIV]
- Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ. 1 Peter 5:14 [NIV]

It is easy to miss the import of these commands because we get hung up on the cultural style of what is appropriate. Our mind gets distracted by the visual imagery of kissing each other at the door and the political correctness of that in a world like our and what would happen if, and. . . we miss the whole point. The point is that God counted it so important that we greet each other appropriately that he elevated it to the level of a command and repeated it four times.

I have had more than a few people irritated at me over the years. I remember talking to a friend once about someone else who was irritated at me. (Probably a better idea to talk with the person who was irritated.) Anyway, I asked my friend what their beef was. “Well,” my friend hesitated. “They said you didn’t say ‘Hi!’ to them when you walked down the hall. You didn’t greet them. You just ignored them. They knew you would never do this to one of your friends, but to them, you didn’t say a word. It made them feel small. It made them feel like they were not important to you.”

“I am spacey,” I protested. But, as much as I have tried to defend my spacey-ness and this is a trivial matter and as much as I have tried to convince myself that they are just too

sensitive, I have to admit that the Bible is on their side. The Bible commands that we take seriously how we greet one another. Back in the day, that meant a warm kiss. Maybe it means something else in our day. Whatever else it means, it means that the greeting in the first minute when people show up is very important.

The way we treat strangers is important to God and it is important to people. How we treat strangers—visitors to our group—may have more to do with whether or not they come back and the growth of the group than anything else. It may be more important than the quality of the teaching or how hard you work at your outreach program.

Here are three things you can do to insure that your visitors are treated as you would treat Jesus if he visited your class.

Make someone in charge

Everyone's responsibility is no one's responsibility. In order to insure that every visitor is treated well, make it someone's job. Have someone stationed by the door prepared to greet everyone who walks in and especially to welcome strangers. Wal-Mart does it. You should too. It could be the teacher, but it is probably preferable that it be someone else. Get the friendliest, happiest, most welcoming person in the room to be in charge of greeting people.

Refreshments

People don't know what to do when the first come in, and they are uncomfortable doing nothing. Give them something to do—eat. Give them something to eat. Eating relaxes people and puts them at ease. It gives them something to do and relieves the awkwardness.

Providing refreshments each week is easy enough to do. First, someone needs to be in charge. Not in charge of making refreshments every week, but in charge of seeing that it is taken care of. About every two months, they can pass around a sign up list with dates for people to volunteer. If it is a large class, you may need several to volunteer each week. A friendly e-mail reminder to the people who have signed up each week would go along way toward insuring that it is done.

Introductions and chit-chat

After a visitor is greeted at the door and shown the refreshments, the next step is introductions. It is not necessary to introduce them to everyone in the group; just a few people. Sit them next to someone and say, “Bob and Cheryl, this is Tom and Betty. Make them feel welcome, will

you?” It is important at this point that Bob and Cheryl make them feel welcome.

How do they do that? Ask lots of questions—questions about Tom and Betty. Questions that are of interest, but not too personal. Good questions are the key to good group life.

Questions like:

- Is this your first time be with us?
- How did you hear about our church (or group)?
- What kind of work are you in?
- How long have you lived here?
- Do you have family in the area?
- Do you have kids?

If the Bob and Cheryl in your group are not naturally good at this, you might coach them to have a list of questions in their mind. It will serve them well, not only in this situation, but in a million situations where they met new people. Better yet, if the Bob and Cheryls of your group are not naturally good at this, you might sit Tom and Betty next to someone else. Let's put our best foot forward. First impressions matter.

This chit-chat ought to continue right up until when the group itself starts, or, when Bob and Cheryl sense that Tom or Betty have had enough chit-chat. There is a fine line between friendliness and nosiness.

From time to time—maybe about once a quarter, you might do a group evaluation of this process. Make sure you have a greeter and refreshments, and then ask. Openly, publically ask members how they felt the first week they were greeted. Hopefully, they will report that they felt great and the group was welcoming and inviting. A report like that will go a long way toward encouraging the group to keep up the good work.

You might think that all this is automatic and trivial and happens all the time and does not warrant writing about. If you had visited as many classes as I have, you wouldn't feel that way. Visitors are often routinely ignored.

Treat your visitors well. The first five minutes set the tone for the rest of the class.

The First Five Minutes, Part Two

Start on time.

That may sound trivial, or persnickety, or overly formal for a group. Whatever. Start on time.

“But, if we were to do that, half our group isn’t there and they would miss it.” Start on time. One of the reasons people show up late to church events is the leadership is in the habit of starting late. We reward the people who are late by accommodating their lateness. We punish the people who are on time by not starting on time.

I would not have thought this was any big deal if it were not for my wife. She does training with me. She trains children and preschool workers, while I train adult workers. She has a talk called K.I.D.T.E.A.C.H. The “A” in this acrostic “Arrive early.” When she first told me that I thought it was a little trivial. But, based on the feedback she has gotten from church leaders across the country, I have come to see the importance of bringing this up. She has told me story after story after story of people who have come up to her after conferences and thanked her for bringing the time issue up. “It is a real problem around here. Teachers don’t show up on time.”

All of the things we talked about in the last chapter can only happen if we are there on time—early in fact. Often visitors are nervous about being able to find their way so they show up early. It is pretty bad if they show up before the people who are in charge. Show up early. Start on time.

Life exposure question

I always start a group the same way—with what I call a life exposure question. The life exposure question does not have to do with the Bible; it has to do with life. It opens the window of each person's life and let's us peer in. Here are some examples from some recent lessons I have written for The Lesson Vault:

- Let's each share our name and one favorite fruit. No one gets to repeat a fruit. (The question relates to that day's study and this verse: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." John 15:16 (NIV))
- Let's each share our name and how many Christians you work with, or how the people you work with feel about Christians. (The lesson that day had to do with being persecuted. This verse sets the stage for that discussion.)
- Share your name and one time you have been

robbed. (The lesson included John 10.10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” John 10:10 (NIV))

As you can see, I try to relate the life exposure question to the lesson of the day. This allows the life exposure to do double duty. The life exposure question can fulfill two purposes at the same time—it exposes a bit of the group’s life to each other, and it helps to teach the lesson itself. (Another example of double duty is using biblical illustrations to make a point. By using a biblical illustration from another place in the Bible, you illustrate your point, while at the same time reminding the group of a biblical story.)

Sometimes, I can’t think of a question that relates to the lesson, so we can’t come up with a question that can do double duty. In this case, I resort to a totally trivial question:

- Share your name and your favorite restaurant.
- Share your name and your favorite fast-food restaurant.
- Share your name and your favorite burger.

Notice, we always start with “share your name and.” If the group is doing any kind of outreach, there will be people there who do not know each other. Or, more likely, they kinda know each other, but they can’t remember that name.

If you feel strongly that you don't need to do this, I have a thought for you to consider: maybe you need to do more outreach. If everyone there knows the name of everyone there, it is time to go out and get some new people. The best way to do that is through parties. Have a party once a month and invite every member and every prospect. That is a great idea, but not the subject of this book.

Benefits of life-exposure questions

They get everyone talking.

I often encourage groups to engage in a question and answer style of teaching, rather than a lecture style. Sometimes, people object. Their objections go something like this. "But our group doesn't talk. They don't like talking. They like hearing me talk. They are a listening kind of group and I am a lecturing kind of teacher. We are a match made in heaven. I talk. They listen."

Or, sometimes people will say, "I tried to get my group talking; they just didn't want to open up. It was awkward."

Here is what I have found. If you can get everyone's mouth open in the first part of the hour, it goes a long way toward creating a discussion during the rest of the hour. Sometimes, you get their mouths open and you can't get them shut, but

that is a topic for another day. Life-exposure questions get groups talking.

They create connections

I have seen it happen a million times. We ask a question like, “Share your name and where you were born.” Someone says, “I am Bob and I was born in Baltimore.” Some shy person from across the room will say, “No way! I was born in Baltimore. Aren’t the crabs the best there?” “Absolutely, best crabs on the eastern shore. What is your favorite crab place?” About this time you might have to encourage the group to continue this crab conversation after class.

Over time, these little connections turn a group of strangers into a group of friends. It doesn’t happen in a day. It doesn’t happen in a week, but, week after week, layer upon layer, this kind of experience creates a groupness. It creates a bond, a sense that we know each other and love each other and know one another’s stories. We feel connected.

They allow everyone to participate

When we get into the Bible study itself, some will be hesitant to participate. Perhaps they don’t know very much, or they are just especially sensitive about being wrong. For a hundred reasons, it is difficult to get 100% participation

during the Bible study time itself, although we push in that direction. But, during this time, everyone can participate. Everyone may not know the meaning of the word perdition, but everyone knows where they were born.

Making Life-exposure questions work

Pace

You want these to go quickly. Spend five minutes—max—on this question. If your group is so big you can't get to everyone in five minutes, you might consider creating another group, but, again, that is a topic of another book. This question needs to go fast.

Modeling

We get fast by modeling fast. I'd start this way, "Let's all go around the room, sharing our name and favorite restaurant. I am Josh and my favorite restaurant is any Mexican food restaurant. Next." By modeling fast, you give everyone the hint that you don't want the complete Zagat's guide restaurants in your town. The life-exposure question is important, but it is important that it be done quickly.

Safe

I would prepare this question ahead of time, rather than dreaming it up on the fly. The reason is safety. Make sure this question is safe and won't embarrass anyone. You want to make sure that this question can't go wrong. Please learn from my mistakes on this.

I was teaching a single's group once and came up with this question off the top of my head: "Let's all share our name and how old you were when you first kissed someone of the opposite sex. Not your sister or your mother, but an honest to goodness romantic kiss." My line of thought with that question was that singles don't do a lot of kissing, so maybe they would enjoy talking about it. And, we did have some fun. One gal was four and we kidded her playfully. One guy was nineteen and we ribbed him a bit. Then we got to one gal, and, (how do I say this gracefully?) not the prettiest gal in the room. In the south they would say it this way, "Bless her heart, she was not much of a looker." In the South you can say anything about anyone, no matter how blunt or rude as long as you proceed it with, "Bless her heart."

Anyway, this gal, bless her heart, not the prettiest in the room confessed, "I am twenty-nine and I have never been kissed." Ouch.

I hurt her. I crushed her. If she is in a group twenty years from now and the question was, "Who can tell us about a moment when you were really embarrassed," that moment in my group would come to mind. Learn from my mistakes. Think through these questions ahead of time.

Let me ask you to work on this a bit by filling out the following chart:

Question	What is wrong with it
State your name and where you graduated from high school.	
State your name and what is your favorite book.	

How did you do? Here is my answer. The first question is bad because there may be someone in the room that didn't graduate from High School, but they don't particularly want to talk about it. You can get at roughly the same information

by asking the group, “State your name and where did you live during your teenagers years.” They may not have graduated, but they did live somewhere.

The second question is a bad one because, sad to say, most people don’t read. Most people have not read a book in years, and many have never read a book. This is a point of embarrassment to many people because, although they don’t read, they feel like they should.

I remember getting my hair cut one time and had just stopped by a book store and picked up a new book. I was fired up about it and was reading while I was getting my hair cut. I was reading until the lady cutting my hair began to confess her guilt. “I feel so badly. I should read more. I hardly ever read. I know I should.” I am not sure why people feel they *should* read but don’t read. All I know is that is fairly common for people to feel badly about the fact that they don’t read.

Why not prayer?

You might notice that I didn’t suggest we start the group time with prayer. This may seem odd to some. Here is what experience has taught me. If you start with prayer requests, it can take a long time, especially as the group gets to know one another well. If you are not careful you can spend half

the hour talking about prayer requests. This kind of thing can ruin your group. (Notice, I did not say too much prayer can ruin your group; I said too much talking about prayer requests can ruin your group.) We want to spend some time discussing prayer requests, but not half the time. Thoughtful people will get restless and anxious for us to get to the lesson.

The solution to this dilemma is as simple as it is effective. Do prayer requests last. Leave five or ten minutes at the end for prayer requests and prayer. People are not nearly as apt to talk and talk and talk about prayer requests at the end of the hour as they are at the beginning of the hour. My practice, then, is to do prayer requests and prayer last.

The first five minutes set the tone for the rest of group time. The first five minutes after people walk in should be filled with greetings, introductions and small-talk. The first five minutes of the group time itself should be around a life exposure question—each person peeling back the layer of their lives just a bit. With this beginning, we are ready to get into the Bible study.

Let the group begin: What does the text say?

“We have to know what the Bible says before we can understand what it means.”

-Walter Hunt (my dad)

Too often groups want to skip this step. We want to move on to the good stuff—discussion about the nuances of what the text means and how it relates to this theology and that and how it is supported by this cross reference and that and (occasionally) how it can be applied to our lives this way and that. All that is good and we will get to that. But first, we have to know what the Bible says before we can understand what it means.

I remember my first pass at trying to understand the book of Revelation. (I have had several and still don't understand it. John Calvin wrote a commentary on every book of the New Testament and many of the books of the Old Testament but did not write one on Revelation. He was asked why he did not write one on Revelation. “I don't understand it” was his simple reply.) Anyway, my first pass was during college and I began reading commentaries and such on Revelation. My dad offered some advice: just read the book. Read it several times, beginning to end. Get to know the book itself. You

have to know what the Bible says before you can understand what it means.

Pace

The pace of a question is important to every question. How you ask the question has a lot to do with how the question is answered. If you ask in a crisp, quick tone, people get the idea you want a simple, straightforward answer. You are not looking for a dissertation. You are looking for “yes” or “no” or “he said this” or “she went there.” Short. Simple. To the point.

Imagine you are looking at the resurrection story from John 20. Let’s look at this passage:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 20:2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” 20:3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 20:4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 20:5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 20:6 Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the

strips of linen lying there, 20:7 as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. 20:8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. John 20:1-8 (NIV)

Before we get into the subtleties of what it means, we might ask a few, "What does the text say" questions. In my online lessons I often provide footnotes to the teacher. These sometimes answer the questions. More often, they explain why I am asking the question. I have provided a few such comments in the footnotes here. In other words, please read the footnotes!

- Who ran the footrace between Peter and the other disciple?¹
- What did the other disciple do when he won the race?
- Where was the burial cloth that had been used to cover Jesus' face?
- What did he (John) do when he did finally go in.²

¹The answer doesn't need to be long and complicated. One word will do: Peter. Your pace and tone as you ask these questions will suggest to the group that you want this to move along. Someone says, "Peter" you say, "Good, next question."

²Believe.

Now, I probably would not ask all these questions in this order quite this way. I am grouping them together here so you can see them all in one place. An actual lesson would mingle these kinds of questions with other questions that we will look at in subsequent chapters. An actual sequence of question might look like this:

- Who ran the footrace between Peter and the other disciple?
- What did the other disciple do when he won the race?
- What does this tell you about Peter?³
- Where was the burial cloth that had been used to cover Jesus' face?
- Is the application here that we should fold our clothes and make our bed before we leave the house?⁴

³You might go from here to talk about other examples of Peter's impulsiveness.

⁴All that from the world fold? I'd put this in the category of a jump-ball question that we will look at later. I am not sure that you can draw this much out of the word fold or the idea that Jesus folded this cloth before he left. But, I feel certain that those who believe "cleanliness is next to godliness" may not be in the Bible but should have been will have a hard time admitting that it is not the more spiritual thing to fold your clothes and make your bed before you leave. Here is a follow up question; can you be godly and be a slob? This is why the Bible says that God's mercies are

- What did he (John) do when he did finally go in?⁵
- What do you think “believe” means in this context? Surely John believed, in some sense, before this. He had been following Jesus for years. What does “believe” mean for John now?⁶

Don't miss this crucial point. “What does the text say” questions are first in terms of logic and purpose, but they are not all asked first in terms of sequence. Don't ask too many in a row. They should be interspersed throughout the lesson, especially as we move through the passage into new material. So the sequence might look like this:

- What does the text say?
- What does the text mean?

“new every morning? If you squeeze the passage hard enough, you can always see things you have never seen before. Of course, if you squeeze it hard enough, you may find things in the passage that even God didn't know were there because He didn't put them there. As we will see later, truth is nearly always a mid-point between two extremes. There may be some virtue in folding your clothes and making your bed, but I am not sure you can get it out of this passage and it can certainly be taken to an extreme.

⁵He believed.

⁶We will explain this later, but these questions will go a little more slowly. Let people think. What is the difference between believe and this “really believe”?

- What are we going to do about it?

Next section

- What does the text say?
- What does the text mean?
- What are we going to do about it?

Of course, it is rarely that clean. Group life is messy. What you are creating here is a structured conversation. It is a road through the biblical material. Conversations tend to take on a life of their own. Like a road following the contour of the land, the lesson must follow the contour of the biblical text. That is, there are certain rules for asking questions, but these rules are implemented and affected by the actual text itself. Here is statement of the obvious: the text of the Bible should influence its study more than the rules of study. So the text itself influences what questions we ask in what order. We say the rule is to ask, “What does it say? What does it mean? What do we do about it?” but it is rarely that simple, or implemented that cleanly. If it were, it would do damage to the study of the text, and make the study a whole lot less interesting. Let the Bible itself influence the sequence of questions.

Using “What does the text say” questions to draw out individuals

A good group discussion is inclusive. It involves everyone. This is nearly always a struggle it is rare that everyone speaks the same amount. Usually, you have some real talkers and some that are a little quieter. To some degree this is normal and you shouldn't try too hard to even things out. But, we can gently push those who are quiet to speak up. We want to train them that they can contribute. But, we want to do this gently because if you push too hard you can easily push them out the door. If they just don't want to talk, respect their wishes. If they just need a little push, give them a gentle nudge. "What does the text say" questions can be used to do this.

I will often call on people by name when I ask the question. In fact, I will begin the question with their name. "Bob, take a look at verse 8. . ." This brings them out of the comma that we are sometimes in when our mind wanders. It is funny how calling on one person by name tends to get everyone's attention. I suppose people have an awareness that since you called on Bob, you might call on me next so I had better pay attention. "Bob, take a look at verse 8 and tell me what this other disciple did when he went inside the tomb." As easy as this question is, Bob will hesitate for a moment. If he hesitates too long, I might give him some further help, "right there at the end of the verse." If he still struggles, I will answer it for him (this rarely happens), "He believes, right, Bob?" Bob will nod. "So," I pretend that this was all part of

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the original question, “What does this tell you about the meaning of the word believe? Surely this disciple—presumably John—believed before now. How is this belief different from the belief he had before?” Now, we make a turn, “Anyone can answer.” I look around the room to let Bob off the hook.

In this way I can push Bob to join the conversation, but not so hard that I embarrass him. Usually, in contrast to the scenario above, Bob does come up with the answer. I have made it fairly easy for him. When he does, an amazing thing happens. His confidence grows. He is more apt to contribute to the conversation now that he has successfully answered this question.

Calling on an individual for “what does the text say” questions has another benefit. It keeps these questions moving along. You don’t want to get bogged down here and, although these are the easiest questions to answer, people often hesitate. The reason people hesitate has to do with the kind of questions people like to answer. People like to answer questions that are on the edge of their knowledge, not in the center. People like to answer questions that they think no one else know the answer to. These questions will inherently be easier than the other questions we will look at. They don’t require a lot of creativity or thought or background knowledge. They just require that you read the

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passage in front of you. You might even be tempted to skip these questions.

Don't skip these questions

There are two reasons we might be tempted to skip these questions.

- They are not as interesting as later questions
- We think everyone knows all this already

One of my seminary professors, Dr. Curtis Vaughan told us the story of a preacher he heard one time who began his message this way, "The music went a little long today, we don't have time to actually read the text. Let me share with you some thoughts I had as I studied this text this week."

Well, let me share with you an opinion I have about that. If we have a choice between the Word of God and this preacher's thoughts about the Word of God, I would rather have the Word of God itself. Now, in an ideal world, I would like to have both. I would like to have the text *and* his thoughts on it, but if I had to choose one or the other, I would take the Bible itself.

We assume people know. Often they don't. Oh, they have vague ideas about the general theme of the Bible, but if you

ask questions with any specificity, you will soon find we are all a little more ignorant than we would like to admit.

I have often asked this question at conferences to illustrate this point. By the way, this is not some trick question, just a straightforward question of Biblical truth: How many times did the people of Israel march around Jericho before Jericho fell? Correct answer: thirteen. Once a day for six days and seven times on the seventh day. I have asked this question to thousands of people in groups over the years and can tell you that there is not one person in a hundred that will get it right. And, the people I am asking are Sunday School teachers, who, presumably, are more biblically literate than are the people they teach. Not one in a hundred of them will get it right. We are all a little more ignorant than we would like to imagine.

You might be thinking, “Well, that is trivia. What difference does it make how many times they marched around Jericho.” True. But, often the power of the word of God is found in details of the text. Here is an example based on a different verse:

But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’ “

Mark 16:7 [NIV]

Question: Who did the young man tell the ladies to tell about the resurrection?

A picky detail in a way, but one pregnant with meaning. “Tell the disciples and Peter.” Peter, the one who had denied our Lord. Peter, the one who was likely embarrassed and depressed and defeated. Tell Peter. Don’t forget to tell Peter.

Some follow up questions will go like this:

- Why Peter?
- What do we learn about God from the inclusion of Peter’s name in this instruction?
- Do you think of God as a God who cares about you as an individual, as He did Peter as an individual?

All those questions can follow, but we need to get the facts of “and Peter” on the table.

Often the power of the word of God is found in picky details of the text. This is a great insight, by the way, when you are dealing with a passage, like the resurrection story and Christmas story that we look at every year. The passage is so familiar we sometime struggle to find something new to say. When that happens, I always tell myself, “Slow down. Read the text one word at a time.”

We are all a little more ignorant than we would like to admit
Numerous research studies reveal the level of ignorance of
people inside and outside the church. Here is one example:⁷

- Fewer than half of all adults can name the four gospels
- Many professing Christians cannot identify more than two or three of the disciples
- 60 percent of Americans can't name even five of the Ten Commandments
- 82 percent of Americans believe "God helps those who help themselves" is a Bible verse
- 12 percent of adults believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife
- A survey of graduating high school seniors revealed that over 50 percent thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife
- A considerable number of respondents to one poll indicated that the Sermon on the Mount was preached by Billy Graham

"Increasingly, America is biblically illiterate." - George Barna

⁷http://www.ccel.org/contrib/exec_outlines/top/bibillit.htm

I heard this story years ago and it is a great example of the idea that we are all a little more ignorant of the Bible that we would like to admit:

An older preacher told the story of a young minister interviewing for his first pastorate. The Pulpit Committee had invited him to come over to their church for the interview. The committee chairman asked, "Son, do you know the Bible pretty good?"

The young minister said, "Yes, pretty good." The chairman asked, "Which part do you know best?" He responded saying, "I know the New Testament best." "Which part of the New Testament do you know best," asked the chairman. The young minister said, "Several parts." The chairman said, "Well, why don't you tell us the story of the Prodigal Son." The young man said, "Fine."

"There was a man of the Pharisees name Nicodemus, who went down to Jericho by night and he fell upon stony ground and the thorns choked him half to death. "The next morning Solomon and his wife, Gomorrah, came by, and carried him down to the ark for Moses to take care of. But, as he was going through the Eastern Gate into the Ark, he caught his hair in a limb and he hung there forty days and forty nights and he afterwards did hunger. And, the ravens came and fed him.

“The next day, the three wise men came and carried him down to the boat dock and he caught a ship to Nineveh. And when he got there he found Delilah sitting on the wall. He said, “Chunk her down, boys, chunk her down.” And, they said, “How many times shall we chunk her down, till seven time seven?” And he said, “Nay, but seventy times seven.” And they chucked her down four hundred and ninety times.

“And, she burst asunder in their midst. And they picked up twelve baskets of the leftovers. And, in the resurrection whose wife shall she be?”

The Committee chairman suddenly interrupted the young minister and said to the remainder of the committee, “Fellows, I think we ought to ask the church to call him as our minister.

He is awfully young, but he sure does know his Bible.”

We are all a little more ignorant than we would like to imagine. Ask, “what does the text say” questions. People have to know what the Bible says before they can understand what it means.

By the way, it is a great time to be a group leader. I heard this story years ago in a sermon and wanted to include it in a talk I do called Ten Marks of Incredible Teachers. I could

not, however remember enough of the actual story to do it justice. I could not remember where I had heard or read the story. I asked my wife about it. She had heard it as well, but could not get me a foot note. She could, however, remember the phrase, “chunk her down boys.” I did a search in Google for “chunk her down, boys” remembering to put it in quotations so it searched for this actual string. (If you don’t remember the quotations marks, it may come up with it anyway. Or, you can also use the advanced search tab.) Anyway, I plugged in “chunk her down, boys” and walla! The first entry was this story. Most stories that you have heard in sermons are on the Internet somewhere. Some preacher has included them in his sermon and posted that sermon online. In this way, every story you have ever heard is available, indexed and searchable for your retrieval. What a time to be alive! What a time to be a teacher!

Going Deeper: What does the text mean?

What-does-the-text-mean questions are the heart of what is usually thought of as Bible study. What-does-the-text-mean questions are the most commonly used kind of questions in Bible study groups, and are the ones you are most familiar with.

Let's look at a few examples. Imagine you are exploring Ephesians 2:10: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Word questions:

What does the word workmanship mean in verse 10?

One key issue with all these questions is this. These words actually mean something. We can't just make up things we think they mean, or wish they

mean. Bible study is not about pooled ignorance. Have you been to those classes? "Well, I think it means this." "No. I

**BIBLE STUDY IS
NOT ABOUT
POOLED**

think it means that.” “Well, I like to believe in a God who is nicer than that.” “Yeah, I like to believe in God that doesn’t get angry.”

God is who He is and us believing or not certain things about Him doesn’t change who He is. These words mean what they mean. We can’t just declare that we see it another way and suddenly make it so.

So, you might be thinking, “Why don’t I just tell them, since I know what the words mean?” Sometimes, you might want to do that. But, it is inherently more interesting to let the group share. And, if you are teaching adults who have been studying the Bible for a

**A RULE OF
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time, they will often have good answers. It is more interesting to ask them than to share all the answers yourself. A rule of thumb is, the teacher in a small group should not talk more than half the time.

Translation questions:

How does your translation deal with the word workmanship?

Of course, I would have some examples of translations ready that tease out the various meanings of the word. In this case, I might have some of the following translations: [emphasis added]

- For we are God's **masterpiece**. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. Ephes. 2:10 [NLT]
- For we are his **handiwork**, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them. Ephes. 2:10 [NAB]
- We are God's **work of art**, created in Christ Jesus for the good works which God has already designated to make up our way of life. Ephesians 2:10 (NJB)

English language users are blessed with such a depth of translations. One of the best sources of information as to what a word means is simply to look it up in several translations.

Bible software makes this easy. If you can afford it, you would do well to spring for some Bible software at some point. There are two big benefits: it makes finding verses quicker, and it allows for searches that would be almost

impossible without Bible software. For example, you can look for every time the words faith and love appear in the same verse. Then, when you find the verses you can put fifteen translations on the screen at once. That would take so long as to be impractical without Bible software, but with it, it is quick and easy.

I took every Greek class available to me in seminary—some twenty eight hours of Greek. One of the things I learned in all that was to have a great appreciation for the work done by translators. We really do have some fine translations. And, having so many available to us helps us to really understand the full circle of meaning that a word contains.

Our translations are so good, in fact that I am very leery when I hear someone say this, “What this word really means is_____. Now, you won’t find this in any of the translations, but the real meaning is thus and so.” If I have fifteen English translations of the Bible and not one of them draws out the meaning this teacher is describing, I am very leery as to whether that is the real meaning.

Study Bible questions:

Does anyone have a Study Bible that has note on verse 10?

Here is the note from the Life Application Bible:

We are God's workmanship (work of art, masterpiece). Our salvation is something only God can do. It is his powerful, creative work in us. If God considers us his works of art, we dare not treat ourselves or others with disrespect or as inferior work. —Life Application Bible Notes

One of the benefits of this kind of question is that it shows people that good Bible tools are accessible. It shows them that they can get answers for themselves. It encourages them to get and use a Study Bible.

Remember the old adage: give a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime. You want to teach people to fish. You want to teach them to study and learn the Bible for themselves. Model for them that good Bible study tools make the meaning of the Bible accessible and one of those tools is a good study Bible.

Dictionary questions:

How does a dictionary define workmanship, masterpiece and handiwork?⁸

- **Workmanship:** the art or skill of a workman; also the quality imparted to a thing in the process of making a vase of exquisite workmanship.

⁸All definitions Merriam Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary.

- **Masterpiece:** a work done with extraordinary skill; especially a supreme intellectual or artistic achievement.
- **Handiwork:** work done by the hands. Work done personally.

There is, of course, one danger in looking at dictionary definitions—these are definitions of translated words. That is every word has a circle of meaning. It is not just one point, but a pool of meanings. The Greek word behind workmanship means a certain things approximated by any of the words above. The words above have their own circle of meaning which is going to be approximately right, but might go outside of the circle of meaning of the original word. This is why we send our preachers to seminary to study Greek and Hebrew. The good news is, there are great tools available for people who have not studied Greek and Hebrew that make the original language accessible. Bible software makes it easy.

Here is the point. Looking at English dictionary definitions can be informative and illustrative, but not authoritative. Because an English language dictionary says a certain word means a certain thing, that meaning may not be contained in the original Greek or Hebrew word.

Greek and Hebrew definitions

Unless you are teaching a group of seminary students, they likely will not have brought “Little Kittel”⁹ under their arm, but it is still possible to look at Greek and Hebrew definitions. You can look these up through Bible software or online and bring the notes to class. In most cases, this will get into more detail than is necessary or useful for you group. Little Kittel for this word, for example, contains 3500 words and would fill fifteen pages of this book at this size of type. That is probably more information than you need. And, that is Little Kittel—the abridged version. The full version is ten times that!

Again, your English translations have done a good job and will generally provide all the information you need.

Cross-references

What other verses talk about this? Do you have cross references in your Bible? What verses do they point us to?

One of the best ways to discover what a word means is to see how it is used in other contexts. A great example is Ephesians 4:12 [NASB], “for the equipping of the saints for

⁹Theological Dictionary of the New Testament by Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Hardcover - Jul 1985) - Abridged.

the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;”
The word translated “equipping” is also found in Matthew 4:21, translated here, “mending.” “And going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them.” Matthew 4:21 [NASB] Whatever the disciples were doing to the nets is what pastors are to do for their people—prepare them for works of service. (Again, let me make a plug for getting some Bible software. I was able to find this reference in about two minutes using tools that are accessible to people without knowledge of Greek or Hebrew.)

Again, a real key is to show how the Bible can be accessible. We need to be careful as we do Bible study that we do it in such a way that demonstrates that people can find this information themselves. Have them look in their Bibles. Probably some in your group have Bibles with cross references and don’t know how they are used. The teaching is doing double duty at this point—teaching the lesson and also teaching how to learn.

Synonyms

What are some synonyms for workmanship?

The word here is the word we get our word poem from. What are some other examples of creative expression? We could say, “We are God’s poem” or “We are God’s _____.”

Opposite

Often, we can shed great light on a word by talking about what it is not. “What is the opposite of the idea of workmanship?” might be an example here.

Here are some other examples:

- We are told not to grumble. What is the opposite of grumbling?
- What is the opposite of love? (Point: it may not be hatred, but apathy.)
- What is the opposite of poor in spirit?
- What is the opposite of being filled with the Spirit?

I used this kind of question recently in a lesson that included Philippians 4.8 “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.” (NIV) You can predict the question: what is the opposite of thinking about these things?

Quarterly / Commentary

Did anyone read their quarterly this week? What did it say about this verse?

Obviously, you will want to know that the quarterly did say something interesting about this verse. This kind of question encourages people to read outside of class—a great practice for people to get into. If they did not read, you might ask them to open up the book and find it for themselves.

Balancing truth

We will explore this in some detail later, but truth is often a magical midpoint between two extremes. I had one pastor, Dr. Frank Zamora, that used to say it this way, “It is not thesis, or antithesis, but syntheses.” In this case we might ask a question that goes like this:

Is it healthy and good that I would get up every morning and look myself in the eye and say, “I am God’s masterpiece. I am God’s workmanship. I am the expressive work of God’s creative hand. I am really special. I am really something.”
Can I take this too far?

In my opinion, you can, and that is the balancing truth. We are to be confident, but not confident in a way that makes us think too highly of ourselves. Rather we want a confidence that gives us the freedom to forget out about ourselves.

If I am wearing some high-water pants, I may lose confidence and be self-absorbed as a result. The goal is not for me to get clothing that makes me think, “Look at me!” but to get clothing that makes me comfortable enough so that I can forget about it. So it with confidence. We want enough to give us the freedom to think of God and others, but not so much that we focus on what an incredible masterpiece of God we are.

Sermons

Have you heard any sermons on this passage? Have you read any books that talked about this? Have you done any Bible Studies in the past on this? What did you learn? The older and more mature the group, the more they will be able to help you with this.

Illustrations

Have you heard any illustrations that explain this passage?

A picture is worth a thousand words and a great metaphor, illustration of story can make the text come alive.

I have used one story about the sanctity of life that, for me, puts to rest the argument. It goes like this: Imagine you are hunting and you see something moving behind the trees.

You are pretty sure it is a deer—99% sure. But, there is a 1% chance that it is a person. Would you pull the trigger? Even if we could be 99% that human life did not start before birth, that is not good enough. If there is only a chance—a small chance—that it is a human life, then everyone agrees that human life must be protected.

Paraphrase

How would you say this in your own words?

One of the great things about teaching from the King James is that you get to do a lot of this. If you teach from a newer translation, of course, the text does not need as much explaining.

Explain it

How would you explain this to an eight year old?

There is a great misunderstanding that deep Bible study is confusing. We sometimes think that the more complicated it is, the more spiritual it is. We speak of esoteric when the word deep would do. We confuse deep with muddy.

I have never been accused of being deep in any teaching I have ever done any where. People often say my teaching is

practical, but never deep. I count that as a compliment. I have often heard teaching by others that some described as deep, but I thought was just confusing. I don't know that the communicator intended that, but whether or not he did, the result is the same. Strive to be clear. Be satisfied with being simple.

What is the context?

What light do the verses before and after shed on this verse? Many difficult passages of the Bible can be understood much more clearly if we just read them in their context. "Go and do likewise" doesn't mean much without a context.

Theology

How does 2 Timothy 2.12 relate to the doctrine of the eternal security of the saints—the doctrine that teaches once saved, always saved? Here is the verse:

If we endure,
we will also reign with him.

If we disown him,
he will also disown us; 2 Tim. 2:12 [NIV]

I tend to let the Bible speak for itself on these kinds of passages. I might ask the question, "According to 2 Timothy

2.12, what happens if we disown Christ?" If the answer disagrees with our theology, so be it.

I might also teach the opposite side of the Calvinistic equation. If we are looking at John 15, I might ask, "Did the disciples make a choice to follow Christ, or were they chosen?" or, "What about us, did we chose to follow Christ or were we chosen?" Here is the verse:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." John 15:16 (NIV)

This may seem contradictory, but my theory is, study the Bible, let the Bible say what the Bible says and let the chips fall where they may.

Locations on a map

Do you have a map in the back of your Bible? Locate Ephesus on a map.

I love maps. I love looking at maps and studying maps. I find it interesting to think about where Paul was and where Ephesus was and what the geography was and how long it took to get there. You might want to match up a map of Israel with a map of your area to compare distances. I

wouldn't spend too much time on this, but it is useful to explore locations on a map.

Benefits of What-does-the-text-mean? Questions

The Bible is, at times, difficult to understand. But, not so difficult that we cannot come to an understanding of it, often with just the use of a few well-worded questions. Sometimes, we just read the Bible too fast, or are too familiar with a passage to really see its meaning.

The Bible is limitless in its depth. It is easy enough for a child to understand, but we can spend the rest of our lives plunging its depths.

Calvin Miller has a great story about this in the book *Depths of God*:

Like all visitors to the Reef, I was at first overwhelmed by the odd sensation of standing up - only ankle deep - seventy or ninety miles out in the middle of the ocean. It was for me the odd sensation that Peter must have felt when he walked on the Sea of Galilee.

But once my "ankle-deep-wonder" had passed, I remembered why I had made the trip. I was with my wife and son. My son had come to scuba dive while my wife and I snorkeled. Snorkeling is a pastime more than a sport. For while my son plunged deeply beneath clear waters to bury himself in the wonder of

the mysterious ocean depths, my wife and I, wearing masks, only floated on the surface facedown.

In some ways what we were all seeing looked the same. But my wife and I literally sunburned our backs in our surface study of the reef, while our son plumbed its wonders.

Miller goes on to explain that both he and his son can tell you about that day and both can say they have been to the Great Barrier Reef. But his knowledge is only surface while his son's understanding has great depth.

What-does-the-text-mean questions help us to plumb the wonder of God's word.

**Limitations of
What-does-the-
text-mean?
Questions**

What-does-the-text-mean question have an important part in Bible study. Without meaning, there is no

application and no life change. The Bible is, at times, difficult

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THE POINT OF
BIBLE STUDY IS
NOT TO MAKE
SMARTER

to understand and its depths are unlimited. Still, it is possible that we spend too much time here.

The point of Bible study is not to make smarter sinners. It is to make saints. The Bible warns that knowledge puffs up. If we are not careful, the very thing that is supposed to make us more mature can harm us. We need to study the Bible. We need to understand its meaning, but we need to move on to application.

In my opinion, most groups spend too much time in What-does-the-text-mean questions. We squeeze its meaning to death without ever asking, “What are we going to do about it”?

Sometimes, in fact, What-does-the-text-mean questions are altogether unnecessary and just get in the way. I was just working on a lesson on Philippians 2:4 “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (NIV) We might spend a question or two drawing out the fact that the text says, “not *only* to your own interest”—implying that we are to take responsibility for our own lives and, in that sense, looking after our own interest. But, we need to move on pretty quickly from this to applying this passage. This passage is not hard to understand the meaning. We will spend the rest of our lives learning to apply the meaning.

If I didn't know my Sunday School teacher as well as I do, I couldn't get away with this, but I tried to drive this point home to him recently. We were having a lively discussion of the text, and it was all very interesting, but time was getting away from us. We had about five minutes left. I raised my hand and posed this question: "In about five minutes we are all going to be walking out that door. What are you wanting us to do about what we learned today?"

My teacher has often reminded me of this comment. As the lesson is winding down he will say,

"This is all very interesting, but I know what Josh is thinking.

IN ABOUT FIVE
MINUTES WE
ARE ALL GOING
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DOOR. WHAT
ARE YOU
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WHAT WE
LEARNED
TODAY?

What are we going to do about what we talked about today?
What is going to change because of what we talked about
today?”

Whether they verbalize it or not, your people are asking the
same thing: “Teacher, what do you want us to do about what
we talked about today?”

What-does-the-text-mean is an important question.
Important, because it lays the foundation to what we will talk
about next. Talk about what the text means. But, don't stop
there. What everyone wants to know and needs to know is,
what do you want me to do about what I heard today?

Making the truth truth that matters: “How did they feel?” Questions

There is a difference between truth and truth that matters. How-did-they-feel questions are one of the best way to make the truth truth that matters.

I saw a great example of the difference between truth and truth that matters recently. My wife’s cousin recently quit smoking. She is a middle-aged adult who has been smoking since she was a teenager and suddenly, she quit.

Why do you think this happened? The truth suddenly became truth that matters. Do you think she finally discovered the warning label on the side of the cigarette box? Do you think she read an article about how smoking can kill you? No. Her brother died of smoking-related problems. She watched her brother die and the cause was smoking and she knew it and the truth became truth that matters.

The people you teach would probably agree that the stories of Samson and Deborah and David and Paul and all the rest are true. But, quite honestly, they don’t matter much to them. It is not truth that matters. Your job is to make the truth truth

that matters. One of the best ways to do that is through How-did-they-feel questions.

How-did-they-feel questions makes the truth come alive. It connects us emotionally with the characters in the story. It bridges the two or three thousand year gab between us and the story and makes us feel the truth, not just know the truth. The emotional connection is the human connection. How-did-they-feel questions makes the truth real. It makes the truth truth that matters.

Modernize the story

In order to make the question work, sometimes it is useful to modernize the story. This is not to change the essential message of the story, but to tell it as it might happen today. If it is a parable of Jesus, we tell it as he might tell it today.

If I am teaching on the story of the prodigal son, I might paraphrase it along these lines:

Imagine a son, say he is nineteen years old and he knows that his dad will leave him in his will, but he doesn't want to wait that long. So, he asks for his check now. (It never occurs to him that the dad might need the money because that is the way teenagers think.) Unbelievably, the dad writes him a check. Let's imagine the dad has some money and he

writes the son a check for half a million dollars. Wow! He never had a Christmas like this before.

He takes the money and runs. He buys a fast sports car and heads out to Las Vegas, Nevada. He starts spending. He spends the money on wine, women, song, gambling, seafood buffets and Celine Dion tickets. After a while he runs out of money. About the same time that he runs out of money, there is an economic down turn. Unemployment skyrockets to double digits. He can't find a job anywhere.

Finally, he gets a job washing dishes at one of the casinos. He can barely make ends meet. He doesn't have any skill to get a better paying job and expenses are high in Las Vegas. One day, he is so hungry that he finds himself instinctively grabbing some of the uneaten food that he is about to drop down the garbage disposal—scraps that someone left on their plate.

Then it hits him. "My dad treats his employees better than this. I could swallow my pride and go home and my dad would take me in and he would give me a job and I could do better than this. At least I would have decent food and a decent place to stay."

He does it. He starts heading home. I have never been to Israel, but people who have tell me it looks a lot like New
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Mexico, where I live. There is not a lot of rain where I live and, consequently, not many trees to block the view. You can see a long, long way—fifty miles or more on a clear day. People who have been to Israel tell me that Israel is a lot that way. There is a place in the story where it says, “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him.” Now, it doesn’t say this, but it stands to reason that if the father could see the son when the son was a long way off, the son could also see the father when he was a long way off. In fact, because the father did not know when the son was coming, but the son did know where his house was, it stands to reason that the son could see the father’s house long before the father could see the boy.

I live in the valley of the Rio Grande River. When you enter the city from the West, there is a particular place where you cross a ridge and the whole valley opens up before you. The Organ Mountains are in the distance and you can see the whole city all at once. At night, it looks like a string of Christmas lights laying in a pile. Imagine the son coming on a scene like that. He can see the area of town that is his neighborhood, though he cannot yet make out the house. How is he feeling in that moment? What is going through his head? What is he thinking about?

I have asked this question to many groups and the answers are as different as they are accurate. The son was feeling all kinds of things:

- Fear
- Dread
- Worry
- Shame
- Guilt
- Embarrassment
- Hope
- Anticipation
- Homesick
- Joy

It is a classic picture of mixed emotions. I think he was feeling a lot of negative emotions. I think he was worried and ashamed. But, I don't think worry and shame would have driven him there. I think he was also feeling some positive emotions—hope and anticipation. Life had gotten pretty bad for him and he was hopeful that it was about to get better.

Now, let's think about this story from the other side. Let's think about it from the Dad's perspective. Do you remember what the text says the dad did when the dad saw the boy?

He ran.

He ran. We know from studying history that middle-aged men did not do a lot of running back in the day. They were dignified. They were sophisticated. They were in charge. They delegated. They pointed. They didn't run.

I'd encourage you to do some reading in this history and in the commentaries, but then, just think about real life. If you are a middle aged man (or woman) think about this: when was the last time you ran? Not just hustled a bit—ran. When is the last time you got into an all-out run? When is the last time you ran as fast as you can run?

For most of us, it has been a while. Most of us, when we get into the middle aged years of life don't do a lot of running. Little kids do a lot of running, but we don't run much once we reach middle age. There are exceptions, of course, but generally, middle aged men don't run. They didn't run then and they don't run now. The text says the dad ran.

I have probably watched one too many Hollywood movies, but I picture this scene in slow motion. The dad running toward the boy. A look of confusion on the boy's face. Why is he running? Is he mad? Is he going to yell at me and tell me to get off his property? No. He is smiling. The dad is smiling the biggest, most welcoming smile he has ever seen. The

son starts to run too. The camera pans back and forth from father to son as they get closer together.

Then they embrace. Oh, do they embrace. The father hugs the son and the spin around and spin around and spin around. Then, I see the father stopping, putting one hand on each of the sons shoulders, taking a good look at him and saying, "Somebody hire a band. Someone call a caterer. Shut down the store. We are going to have the biggest party this town has ever seen."

How do you think the son was feeling then?

However you describe that feeling—loved, accepted, excited, forgiven, whole—that is how God wants you to live your life. He wants you to walk each day in the Father's embrace. He wants to baptize you in the Father's acceptance. He wants to surround you with his love.

Has the truth that God loves you become a little more truth that matters to you?

How did they feel questions do that for us. They make the truth come alive. They make it human. They make it personal. They make it today. They make it real. They make it matter.

How to make How-did-they-feel questions work

How-did-they-feel questions work best (as in the case above) when there is more than one right answer. The son was both excitedly anticipating being home and at the same time dreadful, fearful and guilt-ridden.

I was working recently on a lesson on the trial of Jesus. 26:62 Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” Matthew 26:62-63 records, “But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’” (NIV) Here is the question. How is the high priest feeling about this time? Some right answers include angry, frustrated, smug, shocked, exasperated, worried. I wonder if the chief priests knew their evidence was thin and they were secretly worried that they might not pull this thing off? Here is follow up question: How would the chief priests felt at the end of the day if the trial had gone the other way? Imagine that Jesus had been vindicated by Rome and the charges were dropped and he got off with little more than a hand slap. How would the high priests have felt then?

Here is another example from a recent lesson. The story is that of David and his rebellious son Absalom who is trying to take over his father’s kingdom by force. Consider this text:

Then David said to all his officials who were with him in Jerusalem, “Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will move quickly to overtake us and bring ruin upon us and put the city to the sword.” 2 Samuel 15:14 (NIV)

How is David feeling in this moment? Or, how are David’s feelings different from that of his men at this moment? They are both feeling fear, and perhaps anger. But David is feeling some other things. This is his son. He is mad at him, but he still loves him. He is feeling love in the middle of it all. Perhaps he is feeling guilt for not raising him better, or self-doubt. No doubt he is feeling a profound sadness. It is this mixture of emotions that makes the How-did-they-feel question work.

Consider this poignant passage a bit later:

David mustered the men who were with him and appointed over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. 18:2 David sent the troops out--a third under the command of Joab, a third under Joab’s brother Abishai son of Zeruiah, and a third under Ittai the Gittite. The king told the troops, “I myself will surely march out with you.” 18:3 But the men said, “You must not go out; if we are forced to flee, they won’t care about us. Even if half of us die, they won’t care; but you are worth ten thousand of us. It would be better now for you to give us support from the city.” 18:4 The king answered, “I will do whatever seems best to you.” So the king stood beside the gate

while all the men marched out in units of hundreds and of thousands. 18:5 The king commanded Joab, Abishai and Ittai, "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake." And all the troops heard the king giving orders concerning Absalom to each of the commanders. 2 Samuel 18:1-5 (NIV)

Note verse 4. How is David feeling as he stood beside the gate? How is he feeling when he said, "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake"?

Sometimes, the What-are-they-feeling questions have great importance. Consider the case of Judas in Matthew 27:

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. Matthew 27:3-5 (NIV)

Here is my question: What is Judas feeling here? Is this true repentance? Was he saved? Will we see Judas in heaven? He clearly takes full responsibility for his actions. He does not blame or make excuses. Does it take more than this kind of confession to receive forgiveness?

How-did-they-feel questions are one of the best ways to make the truth truth that matters. They make the story come alive. They build a bridge back through time to that two and

three thousand year old story and make the truth human. We feel connected. It is the emotional connection that makes the text real.

My favorite question comes next.

The Heart of the Lesson: Jump-ball Question

Truth is often a careful mid-point between two extremes. The great fallacy for most of us is not to believe a lie, but to believe one truth too much, to the exclusion of an opposite truth.

Jesus spoke of the narrow way. I believe the reason He spoke of the narrow way is because it is so easy to go too far this way or that. The narrow way is in the middle of the broad way. The narrow way is walking the center stripe down the middle of the road. There are often a thousand ways to go wrong. Only careful wisdom will keep us on the right way, the narrow way, the center strip.

Before I get too far into this discussion, let me illustrate how this works. I have often done it this way in seminars. I divide the crowd into two groups—men and women works. I ask the men to look at this verse and be prepared to answer the accompanying question:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30 [NIV]

According to this verse, is Christian living easy or hard?

Then, I have the men close their eyes, while the women look at this verse and the same question:

“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. Acts 14:22b [NIV]

According to this verse, is Christian living easy or hard?

Then, in one voice I have them answer together. On three, is Christian living easy or hard? One. . . two. . . three. . . The room fills with a conflicting sound. Half the room says “easy” while the other half says, “hard.”

Actually, it is not split quite evenly. Usually, about three fourths of the room says, “hard” while only one fourth says, “easy.” This is because people are letting their own experience shape their thinking. They are not answering according to the verse I gave them, they are answering according to their experience. Many have found Christian living to be hard, very hard.

This demonstrates something rather profound about the modern church. Christian living is hard for us. Even though Jesus said His yoke is easy, most Christians find it hard. And, even with the verse right in front of them, they will say that Christian living is hard. We have not found the narrow way.

Christian living is either easy or impossible, because it isn't you living it. It is Christ living his life through you.

- "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Galatians 2:20 [NIV]
- for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Philip. 2:13 [NIV]
- To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. Colossians 1:29 (NIV)

Allow me to make this very real for you. Think of a day when you lived the Christian life reasonably well. Think of a day when you walked in the Spirit, when you abided in Christ, when you were living a fruit of the spirit life. If you can't think of a day, think of an hour, or a moment. Can you think of a time? (I hope you are thinking of right now.) On that day or

hour or moment when you lived the Christ life, was it easy or hard?

Christian living is easy when you are living it. When the Spirit is flowing through you. When the Wind of the Spirit fills your sails, it is easy. Peter spoke of the men who wrote the Bible as being carried along. (2 Peter 1.21) It is not hard to be carried. Someone else is doing the work. We can't be carried as perfectly as the men who wrote the Bible, but we can be carried along by the Spirit.

I believe the reason many of our churches are failing is because they have not taken on Jesus' easy yoke. They have taken on the yoke of law. They have taken on the yoke of duty. They have taken on the yoke of religion. For if we put on Jesus' yoke we will find it as Jesus described: easy. Christian living is either easy or impossible. It is easy because it isn't you living it; it is Christ living his life through you.

If you have found Christian living to be a struggle, if you have found it to be a pain, if it is for you a duty or an obligation or ought-to and should-have and you-better, you have taken on the wrong yoke. That is the yoke of religion. That is the yoke of law. Take off that yoke. Put on Jesus' yoke. It fits. It is easy. It is a yoke of grace and acceptance

and love and mercy and forgiveness and being carried along by the Holy Spirit.

That will preach, and it is all true. But. It is not the only thing that is true. This is also true: we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. He never promised us a rose garden, or, if He did, we must remember that roses have thorns. Jesus suffered and we will suffer. He was called the man of sorrow and if we follow His way we will have sorrows. He will discipline us as children he loves. The world is a painful place. The storms come—to the just and the unjust, the storms come. It is sometimes a hard place.

Jump ball questions get us in touch with both sides. They help us find the narrow way.

The narrow way, in this case is understanding that, in a way, Christianity is both easy and hard. Christ lives his life through us and it is a matter of getting out of the way and letting Him live His life. But, it is not completely passive. Consider these verses that speak of working hard to live the Christian life:

- We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; 1 Cor. 4:12 [NIV]

- For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 2 Peter 1:5 [NIV]
- Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, Col. 3:23 [NIV]

These two verses, that straddle a chapter break bring together the balance:

To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. Col. 1:29-2:1 [NIV]

Who is struggling and with whose energy? Is Christian living active or passive? Is it letting go and letting God, or is it working hard?

Yes.

Christian living is both active and passive. It is working hard and letting go and letting God have His way. The narrow way understand both. The jump-ball question gets us in touch with the tension.

Predestination vss. free will

The classic example of this tension is the issue of predestination versus free will. I grew up in a Baptist home and a Baptist church and came to believe the middle of the road Baptist perspective on this matter. Baptists are not in universal agreement on this matter, but there is a big middle that is in approximate agreement. I thought everyone who was a real Christian saw it this way, and only fringe groups saw it any other way.

As it turns out, Baptist, as best I can tell, are kind of an anomaly. The world has been divide down predestination/free-will lines, and Baptist don't fit neatly into either category.

Down through the centuries, the church could be divided along the two lines that go like this:

Calvinist love these verses:

- You did not choose me, but I chose you. John 15:16a [NIV]
- It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. Romans 9:16 [NIV]
- As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, Ephes. 2:1 [NIV] (Implication: dead men can choose Christ. They have to be regenerated from the outside.

- These verses are all about before salvation. There are corresponding verses that Calvinist love for after salvation.
- Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Philip. 1:6 [NIV]
- I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. John 10:28-29 [NIV]

Arminians don't like to talk about those verses. They like to talk about these verses:

- And then, whoever calls out to the Lord for help will be saved.' Acts 2:21 [TEV]
- Whoever will CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE Lord WILL BE SAVED. Romans 10:13 [NASB]
- The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9 [NIV]
- And, consistent with the free-will approach, Arminians believe that if you get saved and you don't like it, you can leave. It is a kind of money-back guarantee. They are very comfortable with the verses that say, "If we

disown him, he will also disown us.” 2 Tim. 2:12b
[NIV] or, as other translations have it, “If we deny Him,
He also will deny us.” 2 Tim. 2:12b [NASB]

So, we can divide these beliefs into a matrix:

	Arminian	Calvinistic
Before salvation	Whosoever will may come.	You did not choose me; I choose you.
After salvation	If we deny Him, He will deny us.	He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.

I have no desire to enter this debate. Brothers have been debating this issue since the time of Paul and will be debating till Christ’s return. My point is this: if you push any one of those beliefs into the corner, you get stupidity.

Let’s take the lower right-hand box as an example. I heard an interview one time where a man was asked about his theology at this point. “Do you believe in once saved, always saved”?

“Oh yes, I believe it so strongly that I believe that once you place your faith in Christ you could backslide and wander from God or even outright reject God and say to Him, ‘I don’t want your salvation. I don’t want to be a Christian. I no longer believe.’ and God will hold you by the nap of your neck and say, ‘Sorry. You wanted in. You can’t get out.’”

I asked my dad, who believes in the security of our salvation, about this. “Is that right, Dad?” We can shake our fist in the face of God and say, “I don’t want your salvation. And God will hold us and say, ‘Too bad, you wanted in; you can’t get out?’” My dad wisely responded, “I wouldn’t try that if I were you, Son.”

My Dad understood the narrow way. He understood that we have security in our salvation and we can rest in our relationship with God. But, there is a reason the Bible includes the warnings that those who endure to the end will be saved.

If you push any one of those four quadrants to the corner, you get stupidity.

You may not believe, as the Calvinist do that your salvation was predetermined before the start of time, but I hope you understand there was more going on than you just being able to see a good deal and being smart enough to get in on

it. God was acting on you from the outside. He was doing for you what you could not do for yourself.

You may believe that God has determined who will be saved, but don't believe as strongly as those who opposed William Carey, the father of the modern missions movement, and said, "Sit down, young man, if God wants to save the heathen in India, he will do it without your help or mine." That is Calvinism pushed to the corners and Calvinism pushed too far.

You may think you can lose your salvation, but I hope you see that possibility as a rather extreme case. Isaiah 49.15 asks, "Can a mother forget her baby?" The answer is, "Not usually." There is an extremely strong bond between a parent and a child. But, you have known situations as I have where a parent did forget their child. Still, the point is, it is rare. I hope you have the confidence in God and understand that you would have to be extremely and openly rebellious toward God in a rather sustained way for Him to put you out.

When you push any one of the doctrines to its corner, you end up with heresy. What you end up with is stupidity.

Faith and works

Another place where the tension is been hotly debated is over the issue of faith and works. If you are, as I am, on the protestant/ evangelical side of things, you are probably uncomfortable with this statement:

Faith by itself,
if it is not accompanied by action,
is dead.

We read a statement like that and it sounds vaguely familiar so we don't want to reject it outright, but we sure want to say, "Yeah, but. . ." We don't embrace it in the same way we embrace the verse that says, "not by works, so that no one can boast." We have not memorized James 2:17 as we have memorized Ephesians 2.9. We are out of balance. We have lost the narrow way. When we read Ephesians 2.9 we pound the pulpit and raise our voices. When we read James 2.17, we mumble.

We need to get comfortable with the fact that there is no salvation without works. That kind of faith—the works-free kind does not save. Works don't save, but there is no salvation without them. Do you feel the tension? That is the narrow way. "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did." James 2:22 [NIV]

Jesus taught that “by their fruits you will know them.” (Matthew 7.16) Some have preached a gospel that suggests you can live like the devil and end up with the angels as long as you do this transaction called being saved. The Bible does not teach that. But, it is not about behaving our way into heaven, either. It is about walking the narrow way.

Jump ball questions get us in touch with the narrow way. They get us in touch with the tension. Most people don't believe a lie so much that they believe the truth in an out of balance way. They have missed the narrow way. The jump ball questions helps to get the group back into the center.

Sunday School is famous for giving oversimplified answers to complex questions. A “Sunday School” answer does not mean a profound, thoughtful answer. It means an overly simplistic answer to a complex question. Answers like:

- We are saved by grace through faith apart from works and that is that.
- One saved and always saved.
- Let go and let God.
- It is not about you.

The truth is, there is more to it than that. The truth is more complex than that. The truth is:

- We are saved by grace through faith apart from

works, but it is always the kind of faith that is accompanied by works.

- Once saved always saved, but those who endure to the end are the ones that are truly saved and if we disown Him, He will disown us.
- Let God and let God. “To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.” Colossians 1:29 (NIV)
- It is not about you, but God does offer you an abundant life. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11 [NIV]

All through the Bible we find this tension. Jump-ball questions get us in touch with the tension.

We need to teach people to think, to argue, to defend their position, to balance opposing ideas. I heard a Christian counselor say recently he has never seen a single example where a couple disagreed over a parenting strategy and the best answer was on one side or the other. The best answer was always the narrow way somewhere in between. One parent wants to be more strict. The other wants to be more lenient. The narrow way is in between.

James Dobson tells the true story of women who have embraced the biblical teaching of submission and embraced the biblical teaching on servanthood and putting the needs of others first and when their husbands suggested that they should invite another women to join them in their bedroom the women did it. They did it in the name of obedience to the command of God to be submissive. They did it in the name of obedience to the biblical principle of servanthood. When you push servanthood that far, you sled right past the truth into the lap of stupidity.

Some, on the other hand want to erase the biblical injunction for wives to submit to their husband. They speak of mutual submission so loudly so as to erase all distinction between men and women. This is missing the narrow way on the other side. There is a difference.

We are giving our classes answers when what we need to be giving them is questions. Hard questions. Difficult questions that have no Sunday School answers.

When you got it right

You know you got it right when people are still engaged at the end of the hour. You know you got it right when people are arguing and raising their voices and you have to tell them the hour is late. You know you got it right when they

call you three days later and say, “I have been thinking about what we talked about and, have you ever thought about this. . .?”

You know you got it right when you have to remind people that we must disagree agreeably and that we are called upon to live lives where our gentleness is evident to all.

Most Bible Studies are too polite. They are too placid. They are too predictable. They are too sleepy. I love to walk into a class full of Baptist parroting the party line about one-saved-always-saved with this kind of yup-yup tone and just read one verse, “If we disown Him, He will disown us.”

Silence.

Then someone will speak up and say, “I don’t believe that.”

“It is in the Book.”

“Where?” Now we are about to have a conversation. Now, things are going to get interesting. Now a fight just might break out.

Every truth has a balancing truth, including this one
You can take this truth too far. You can believe this too much. You can take it so far that you believe everything and
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hold to nothing. Taken too far, your theology is all about yeah-but and you never say with Luther, “Here I stand. God help me. I can do no other.”

Some things don't have any balancing truth. They just are. Jesus is Lord. God is God. The Bible is truth. These are just truth. We need balance, but not too much balance. Every truth has a balancing truth, including this one. The jump-ball question gets us in touch with that. The lead us to the narrow way.

Where are you at? Questions

The questions up to this point help to establish the high bar. They answer the question, “What does God want us to do?” From this point, we turn a corner. We want to talk now about how we are doing. We want to talk about the gap between how we are doing and how God would have us to live.

Exposure to the gap can be contrasted with what I call, “yup-yup” teaching. This is teaching where we just affirm what we already believe. The teacher presents truth and everyone nods and says “yup-yup.” There is more to good teaching than that. Somewhere along the line we need to communicate, “You are sinning and you need to quit.” Of course, I don’t recommend using those words, but we much communicate the message of the gap between God’s high and holy calling for our lives and how we are living right now.

But, don’t people know that they have a gap? Well, no, as a matter of fact, they don’t.

Why people don’t see the gap

There are two reasons people don’t see the gap: pride and denial. Denial says we don’t think about the gaps. Pride says that when we do, we tend to minimize them.

This tendency to think about ourselves in a more flattering light than is warranted is well documented in psychology. It is called the self-serving bias. Here are some examples.¹⁰

- Researchers surveyed 829,000 High School Students and asked them if they were above or below average in terms of their ability to get along with others. Obviously, 50% are below average. 0% rated themselves as below average. 25% thought they were in the top 1%.
- Most drivers think they are above-average drivers including drivers who have been hospitalized for a crash that they caused.
- George Barna found that 90% of all pastors rated themselves as above-average in teaching and preaching. These are people who have to preach on Romans 12.3, which says, “Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought.”
- 94% of college faculty members think they are above average teachers.
- When the concept of self-serving bias is explained to people, most people rate themselves as above-average in not falling prey to the self-serving bias.

¹⁰John Ortberg, Audio Series: *FLOW*. CD #8, Track 1. Oasis Audio. 2004.

The gap exists, but we don't see it. Where are you at questions can help us cut through the denial and the self-serving bias.

Making where are you at questions work

Most people think of themselves as normal. So, one of the easiest ways to start with where are you at questions is to ask about normal people:

- How often do most people have a quiet time?
- What percentage of their income do most people give?
- What percentage of the people who were in church this morning could name their spiritual gifts?

When people answer these questions, they will generally—though not always—be talking about themselves. From here, you can pull the noose.

- What about the people in this room, how common is it for us to share our faith?
- How would you say we are doing as a group in terms of creating authentic community?
- What keeps this group from doubling every two years or less?

From here, we can pull the noose even tighter:

- What about you, when is the last time you and your

wife had a date night?

- What fears keep you from abundant Christian living?
- If you knew Christ were coming in twenty-four hours, what would you need to do to be ready?

From here, the questions will go into 1) application: what could we do to close the gap? 2) motivation: what are the benefits of closing the gap? and what will it cost you if you don't? and 3) commitment: what do you want to do about what you heard today?

Before we get into these next three steps, let's explore a little more carefully the hidden benefit—the magic of the where are you at question.

The hidden benefit

The Bible says: Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. James 5:16

It is interesting to me what this verse does not say. It does not say that healing comes from trying hard, or being disciplined or even letting go and letting God. This verse teaches us that healing comes as we confess our sins. As

we acknowledge the gap, the gap gets smaller. There is something magical about acknowledging the gap.

I take a pretty broad definition of sin. The Bible speaks of sin as everything that falls short of God's glorious ideal. Anything in your life and mine that is not glorious and ideal is my sin. My debt, my anger, my depression, my purposelessness, my prayerlessness and everything else in my life that is not glorious and ideal is my sin. It could be the sin that I committed, or it could be the sins committed against me. Christian counselors and participants in the recovery movement will attest that great healing comes to us as we confess sins committed against us. The odd thing is, I don't necessarily need a solution. I just need someone to whom I can confess my sins.

John Wesley's Small Group Questions

1. Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?
2. Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?
3. Do I confidentially pass onto another what was told me in confidence?
4. Am I a slave to dress, friends, work, or habits?
5. Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?
6. Did the Bible live in me today?
7. Do I give it time to speak to me everyday?
8. Am I enjoying prayer?
9. When did I last speak to someone about my faith?
10. Do I pray about the money I spend?
11. Do I get to bed on time and get up on time?
12. Do I disobey God in anything?
13. Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
14. Am I defeated in any part of my life?
15. Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?
16. How do I spend my spare time?
17. Am I proud?
18. Do I thank God that I am not as other people, especially as the Pharisee who despised the publican?
19. Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize,

In the Bible we call this person a priest. A priest is one who represents God to me and represents me to God. I think one of the reasons we miss this point is out of a misguided reaction against the Catholic application of James 5.16. The Catholic approach to go to a priest. Now, let's think about this.

True or False:

We don't need a priest.

I have asked this question to hundreds of groups. Ninety-five percent get it wrong. The correct answer is False. We do need a priest. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. Now, if we believe in the priesthood of all believers, it stands to reason that we need these priests for something. Our difference with the Catholics is not about whether or not we need a priest, it is about who the priests are. We believe that all believers are priests. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." 1 Peter 2:9 [NIV] It is true that we can go individually and directly to God. We don't need an intermediary. But, there is great healing in confessing our sins to one another.

Ted Haggard needed a priest

Ted Haggard was the pastor of New Life Church—a true mega-church in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He was the president of the National Association of Evangelicals. He was an author, a leader, and a hero of mine. I had enjoyed several of his books and had conducted an interview with him. I really was in rapport with his approach to small groups and ministry.

But Ted Haggard had a problem. This is a little difficult for us to relate to because we may not have the same particular flavor of problem. But, at the end of the day, we are just talking about different flavors. Ted Haggard's flavor of temptation was, he wanted to be with a man.

One winter day, Ted's life came crumbling down when a male prostitute in Denver accused him of having a three-year professional relationship with him. His story was that he had not known who Ted was through most of that relationship. Not until he saw Ted on T.V. did he realize that Ted was a famous preacher. Ted was publically opposed to homosexuality. The hypocrisy of it drove him crazy. It drove him to get on T.V. and tell the world about their relationship.

It was quite the scandal. For a day or two Ted denied it. But the Bible says, "What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in

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the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.” Luke 12:3
Things have a way of coming out. Secrets have a way of
being told. For a day or two, Ted denied it, but then, he had
to come clean. The following is an excerpt from a statement
he had read before his church. Read carefully:

The public person I was wasn't a lie; it was just
incomplete. When I stopped communicating about my
problems, the darkness increased and finally
dominated me. As a result, I did things that were
contrary to everything I believe.

What is amazing to me about this statement is the
implication of the second sentence: “When I stopped
communicating about my problems.” Stopped
communicating. This implies that there had been a
time when he had someone in his life that he could
communicate with about this. That is amazing. Who
does a pastor go to and talk about the fact that he
longs to be with a man?

Sin is a tricky thing. Sometimes, we are relieved of sin all at
once. Sometimes, presto, we are saved and it is gone.
Sometimes, however, we struggle. Sometimes we struggle
our whole life. Sometimes God leaves the thorn in the flesh
with us. Sometimes God takes away the load. Sometimes,
He gives us a stronger back. Sometimes we have to fight
and resist and keep fighting and keep resisting.

As long as Ted had someone—a priest—that he could talk to
about his sin, talking pushed back the darkness. But, “When
I stopped communicating about my problems, the darkness

increased and finally dominated me.” Having a priest in his life—someone he could talk to about what was not perfect—created a bubble inside which he could walk and breathe. When he stopped talking, the bubble collapsed.

What is a small group?

A small group is not a miniature worship service with a miniature pulpit and a miniature preacher. A small group is a church of a different sort. It is an interactive group. It is a participatory group. It is a one another group. It is a place where we can get honest. It is a place where the masks can come off. It is a place where we can come clean. It is a place where we can get real. It is a place where we can confess our sins. It is a place where we can find healing.

Not that all this confession will happen in group per se. Much of it will happen outside of group. The group time is only one part of group. The whole idea of group is to develop relationship where people get together outside of group. In these relationships the masks come off. Honesty develops. We get real. We get well.

Where are you at questions pave the way. They begin the process in class that continues in relationships in the rest of life.

The key to making it work

But, “I ask and they don’t get honest” you might be thinking. Here is the key: you get honest. You take off your mask. Quit pretending you have it all together. It is amazing how when one person gets honest, the whole atmosphere of the group changes.

We must do this carefully. It is possible to share too much with too many too quickly and do more harm than good. There is a place and time to keep a secret. There is such a thing as too much information.

I was in a church service once where a gal came forward during the invitation. She was crying. “I just need to confess my sin to the body of Christ. I need to get something off my chest.” The pastor handed her the microphone. Not a good call, in this case. “I just need to confess my sin to the body of Christ. I need to get something off my chest. I have been guilty of sexual immorality with John Smith.” John [not his real name] was sitting about three rows back. I had the feeling he was not in the mood to have his sins confessed.

There is a line in a old hymn that goes, “Plunge in today and be made complete.” Sometimes we do well to do that—plunge in. Sometimes, we do well to take a different approach—wade in slowly. Did you see the movie *What About Bob?* Baby steps. Baby steps. Baby steps.

Most classes I have been, however, err on the other side. They are too superficial. Too much pretending. Too fake. The key is for one person—normally the leader—to get real, take off his or her mask and get honest.

Let the magic begin.

Application questions

Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. James 1:22 [NAB]

The goal of Christian teaching is not to cover the material, or to dispense information or to make smarter sinners. The goal is to make saints. The goal is to make disciples. “Doers of the word and not hearers only.” The goal is application. The goal is changed lives.

I work full-time persuading and training groups to double every two years or less. The more I do it, the more I am convinced that the problem with Sunday School is not a Sunday School problem. The problem is we have failed to create soldiers. We have failed to create saints. We have failed to create disciples.

“But we are comfortable.”

I am fond of pointing out that a group of ten that doubles every eighteen months will reach a thousand people in ten years. We can do that by growing a group by 40% every nine months, or going from 10 to 14 in nine months. In looking at whether or not this is possible, I often ask groups,

“Could you do it if I offered you a million dollars to get it done?” We could do it, oh, we could do it. The question is, do we want to?

The most common reaction to this challenge is not that it is not realistic or that it can't be done. It is this: “But we are comfortable.”

Quite honestly, I can't believe that believers have the nerve to say that out loud. Tell me it is not possible. Tell me I am a dreamer. Tell me it is not strategic. Tell me you have a better plan. But, don't tell me you agree that we could reach a thousand people in the next ten years but you would put your comfort above that.

This is not a Sunday School problem. This is a values problem. This is a discipleship problem. This is an application problem. We are not creating doers of the word.

I thought it was all about. . .

Here is another response I received once to the vision of doubling groups reaching a thousand people in the next ten years by doubling every eighteen months, “But, I thought Sunday School was all about me going deep with a handful of people and developing relationships and getting close and cultivating intimacy and how are we going to do that if we split up our groups every eighteen months?”

I didn't say it, but here is what I was thinking. That is just it, isn't it? It is not all about you. It is about God. It is about a cause. It is about the advancement of the kingdom. It is about God being glorified and thanked and acknowledged and enjoyed and treated better than He is treated in your neighborhood and mine. It is about the lost missing spending and eternity in hell separated from God and instead spending eternity with God enjoying his pleasures forevermore. In light of that, going deep with some friends pales in comparison.

And, it is not like you have to say good bye to all your friends. A dirty little secret of the doubling group strategy is we get to take our best friends with us. And, there is no rule that says you can't see people who are not in your group outside of class.

God wants to give us life and give it to us to the full. He wants to thrill us, to fill us, to forgive us, to give us peace and joy and abundance. But, we have to do it His way. His way is all about losing ourselves in the cause of advancing the kingdom.

Again, this is not a Sunday School problem. It is a discipleship problem. It is an application problem. It is doer of the Word problem.

We are not willing to do that

A man spoke to me before a conference once. "I don't think we are going to be able to double our class." "Why not?" "Well I am in a room that holds twenty chairs and we have eighteen of them filled on an average Sunday." "Have you thought about dividing your class? Have you thought about moving nine of the men down the hall to start a new group?" I will never forget his response: "Oh no, we are not going there. My pastor has talked to me about that. We have talked about that. We are not willing to do that."

Willing.

The word rings in my ears. Willing. We are not willing to do that. I have been thinking about this for a long time, and here is the conclusion I have come to: that is a phrase that no Christian ought to ever say to the Lord about anything. "We are not willing to do that?"

Somewhere along the line in our journey we face a door I call the door of Lordship. We go through this door and acknowledge that God is God and I am not. He is boss and I am not. He is Master; I am slave. Christian living is all lived on the other side of that door. It is all lived on the other side of the door of Lordship.

Before we walk through that door, it is walking in the flesh. It is a life of religion. There is no abundance. There is no joy. There is no fulfillment. There is no fruit. Christian living is all lived on the other side of the door of Lordship.

The issue is not that we cannot figure out how to double a class in two years or less. The issue is we are not willing to do so. It is not a Sunday School problem. It is an application problem. It is an obedience problem.

How to ask effective application questions

The key to making application questions work is to distinguish them from commitment questions. In a way, commitment questions are the point, and we will get there soon.

At this point, we are not actually asking people to do anything. We are asking them what they could do. We are asking how someone might apply this to their lives.

In my seminars I teach on a party driving strategy. It is a strategy modeled by Levi:

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. Luke 5:27-29 [NIV]

It is commanded in several places in scripture:

- Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. 1 Peter 4:9 [NIV]
- Get into the habit of inviting guests home for dinner or, if they need lodging, for the night. Romans 12:13b [NLT]
- When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends. Luke 14:12b [NIV]

Often, I will conclude this section of the seminar with an application question: what are twenty ways you could do this? What are twenty kinds of banquets, dinners or parties you could have and invite outsiders to attend? The list might look something like this:

New years eve party	Back to School Party
Super bowl party	Guys night out
Valentines Day party	Ladies night out
Labor Day party	Back yard barbeque
July 4 party	Bowling party
Fall Family Festival	Baseball game
Memorial Day Party	Dinner and a movie
	Card night
	Game night

Fishing trip
Camping trip

Shopping trip
Christmas party

Here is the key point: I have not asked them to actually do any of these parties. I have only asked them to make a list. I have only asked them how they could apply the principle of offering hospitality.

Husbands, love your wives

The Bible commands husbands to love their wives (Ephesians 5.25 - 27). Here is an application question that flows from that: What are ten ways a husband could love his wife? Or, perhaps you could divide the men and women up. Let them both come up with a list. See how many the women come up with that the men cannot even think of. Answers might include:

- Take out the trash
- Watch the kids
- Send cards
- Send flowers
- Set up a date night
- Remember our anniversary
- Non-sexual physical affection
- Long, unhurried walks

Again, the point here is that you have not yet asked the men to do anything. You have only asked them to think to things they could do.

By separating the application questions from the commitment questions, you unleash everyone's creativity. They are not evaluating each item and deciding whether or not they will do it. In the next section we will talk about the benefits of doing this application and the cost of not doing it. When we finish with that, they will be far more motivated to do some of these things. For now, we just want to brainstorm as many applications as possible.

Two Magic Questions

These two magic questions are based on two deeply held convictions. I have talked to thousands of believers about these convictions, and they all agree with them. But, they stand in stark contrast to the conversations that often go on in small groups. Here are the convictions:

- It is always in our best interest to live the Christian life.
- We are irrevocably hard-wired to pursue what we believe to be in our best interest. In the long run, we will do what we believe to be in our best interest. This is why our belief is so important to the Christian faith.

I have asked thousands of believers if they agree with the first statement. They all agree. I press them: always? Are there ever any exceptions? Won't you pay more taxes? Won't you get there later? Mightn't a little lie get you out of a bind from time to time? Is it always in your best interest to live the Christian life?

Over the long run, it is. In the short run, it might cost you. In the short run it might be painful, but it is always in our best interest to follow God in the long run.

The Bible says, "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome." 1 John 5:3 [NIV] Not burdensome. In the long run, it is always in our best interest to live the Christian life.

In Deuteronomy it says, "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction." Deut. 30:15 [NIV] If you want life, here is one word formula: obedience. If you don't care about life, go the other way, choose disobedience. But, the end is death.

Stating the same thing from the back side, it goes like this:

Self-discipline is generally over-rated in Christian teaching. Not that there is not a place of self-discipline. There is. But, it is like a spare tire. Sometimes you need a spare tire. Spare tires are good. But, if you try to live your

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whole life on a spare tire, you will soon be in trouble.

Self-discipline, by which I mean forcing yourself to do what you basically do not want to do is over-rated. It is a spare tire. Sometimes, you and I will need to do that. But if we try to live our whole life forcing ourselves to do what we basically don't want to do, eventually we will get tired and we do what we want to do.

You must come to love the Christian life, or you will never come to live the Christian life. You must discover what the hymn writer had in mind when he wrote, "Sweet hour of prayer" or you are likely not praying

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very well. We either learn to “love to tell the story” or we don’t tell the story much. We must love it, or we will never live it.

This is not only my opinion, but also the opinion of smart people. One of them is C.S. Lewis. Observe what he says about self-discipline, or, in his words, self-denial.

The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire.

If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. (C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*)

[Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], pp. 1-2.)¹¹

The reference to Kant, by the way, is explained by Ayn Rand this way:

Ayn Rand (novelist and atheistic philosopher): “An action is moral, said Kant, only if one has no desire to perform it, but performs it out of a sense of duty and derives no benefit from it of any sort, neither material nor spiritual. A benefit destroys the moral value of an action. (Thus if one has no desire to be evil, one cannot be good, if one has, one can.)” (*For the Intellectual*, New York: Signet, 1961, p.32)¹²

Why the juxtaposition?

It is always in our best interest to live the Christian life. Why then, do we so often hear teaching along these lines:

- Choose God’s way, not your way!
- It is not about you. It is about pleasing and glorifying God.

If it is in our best interest to live the Christian life, it seems this creates an artificial tension. It creates an imaginary choice that, on the surface, sounds spiritual: chose God’s way, not your way! Sounds good, but, if we are thinking

¹¹http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Seminars/1588_Desiring_God

¹²http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Seminars/1588_Desiring_God

rightly we understand that God's way is always good for me. It is always in my best interest to live the Christian life. Choosing God's way is the best thing I can do for me. If I want the best life for me, I will always choose God's way.

In a way, if I were truly pursuing my self-interest, and were thinking rightly about it, I would always pursue obedience. This is what John Piper means when he says, "let your passion be single." It is one single desire to please God and to please myself. Here is Piper's way of saying it:

A Summary of Christian Hedonism in Five Statements

1. The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful.
2. We should never try to deny or resist our longing to be happy, as though it were a bad impulse. Instead we should seek to intensify this longing and nourish it with whatever will provide the deepest and most enduring satisfaction.
3. The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God.
4. The happiness we find in God reaches its consummation when it expands to meet the needs of others in the manifold ways of love.
5. To the extent we try to abandon the pursuit of our own pleasure, we fail to honor God and love people. Or, to put it positively: the pursuit of pleasure is a necessary

part of all worship and virtue.¹³

Another saint that saw this truth was George Muller:

The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not, how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished. For I might seek to set the truth before the unconverted, I might seek to benefit believers, I might seek to relieve the distressed, I might in other ways seek to behave myself as it becomes a child of God in this world; and yet, not being happy in the Lord, and not being nourished and strengthened in my inner man day by day, all this might not be attended to in a right spirit (Autobiography of George Mueller, compiled by Fred Bergen, [London: J. Nisbet Co., 1906], pp. 152-154).¹⁴

An everyday example

Most of us struggle to one degree or another with issues of health—eating healthful foods, excising and maintaining our weight. Have you ever known someone that didn't seem to struggle?

¹³<http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Seminars/15>

[88 Desiring God](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Seminars/15)

¹⁴<http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Seminars/15>

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I have a friend that doesn't seem to struggle with these issues. I have known him for twenty-five years and for twenty-five years he has exercised at least five times a week. We have gone out to eat hundreds of times over the years and nine times out of ten he gets salad or grilled chicken and broccoli. He is slim, trim and in-shape.

Do you know anyone like that? How do they feel about fatty foods? How do they feel about healthful foods? How do they feel about exercise? My friend tells me he just loves this warm feeling he has in his muscles after a good work-out. (I don't actually know what that feeling is!)

People that win the war of healthful living always feel this way. They love it. They love eating healthful food. They love exercise. We either come to love it, or we never do it consistently.

I had another friend who represents the opposite. He told me he had just lost forty pounds going through the Weigh-Down workshop. We were sharing a meal and one of those greasy spoon diners in central Texas. The parking lot was packed. He explained to me that people came from all over to enjoy the incredible chicken-fried steak they had at this place. He described it as being bigger than Texas—a big old fried steak

with greasy gravy all over it and mashed potatoes and greasy gravy all over that and it was like heart attack on a plate but it was sooooooo good! What would my friend do? He was torn. He wanted the chicken friend steak with the greasy gravy and mashed potatoes and greasy gravy all over that, but he should have grilled chicken and broccoli.

Now, the real question is not what did he do that day. The real question is this. What chances do you give my friend of keeping that weight off? What chances do you give him of being slim, trim and in shape a year later?

I give him no chance at all. Why? What does he believe to be in his best interest? He believes that life is about eating chicken fried steak with grease gravy but he should eat grilled chicken and broccoli. And as long as he believes that, in the long run he will do what he believes is in his best interest. He is hard wired for that.

It is like the auto-pilot on a plane. You can set an auto-pilot to take you from Dallas to Chicago. You can turn the stick on the plane and force it to go South instead. But, eventually, you will get tired and the plane will make its way North again. So it is with our desires. We can force ourselves to do what we don't want to do for a time, but eventually, what we want to do wins out. Eventually we do what we want.

I knew a woman once that was deeply in love with a man that was not her husband. The man was married as well. They were both active church members in the same church. This is the way she saw life. "I know I should cut off this relationship, but it just feels like life to me. I know pursuing that relationship doesn't honor God, and God would be happier with me if I would break it off, but he just makes me feel so alive. I should choose God's way, but I want so badly to choose my way."

As long as she feels this way, there is not enough will power in the world to keep them a part. Eventually we all do what we believe to be in our best interest. We much come to love the Christian life, or we will never come to live the Christian life.

An extreme example

"Always?" you might be wondering. Is it always in your best interest to live the Christian life? Aren't there some exceptions?

Take the case of Cassie Bernall. She was one of the High School students who was gunned down in Littleton, Colorado. Before he shot her, her killer pointed a gun in her face and asked her a simple question: Do you believe in

God? (The forensic evidence suggested the gun was touching her face when he pulled the trigger.) Cassie had a simple choice. It is fairly clear what God would have her do. The Bible says, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." Luke 9:26 [NIV] God's calling on her life is pretty easy to understand at the point.

I have a biography on Cassie's life. The title is *She Said Yes*. She said yes, and he blew her head off with the gun pushing against her face.

One might be tempted to ask, "Mightn't it been in her best interest to not be so bold? Mightn't it be in her best interest to cave? Mightn't it have been in her best interest to say, 'I don't want any trouble. Please spare my life.'?"

The Bible teaches that reality is like a line that stretches forever and ever.

Reality

Not just to the edge of this page, but forever. All of time can be pictures as a dot that sits on the line.

Time



Reality

All of time sits on that dot—from Adam and Eve to the disasters to Abraham to Jesus to Columbus to you and I and our great-great-great grand kids if Christ waits that long. All of time fits in the dot and the line lasts forever.

Those who are martyred for their faith will receive a greater reward in heaven—throughout the whole line—than will the rest of us. (Revelation 4)

I am not exactly what is involved in that greater reward, but I picture it in somewhat material terms:

- When we go to a concert, Cassie will get a front row seat and a back stage pass. We might be sitting in the balcony.
- When we get in line to eat, she will get in the front of the line.
- When we go on a trip, she will get to sit in those big seats up front.

That may not be exactly right, but the Bible does teach she will get a greater reward in heaven. And heaven is the line. It

is forever. Ten million years from now, she is still getting in the front of the line.

I think if Cassie could listen in on this, she would say, “Yes, yes, a thousand times yes, it is always in your best interest to live the Christian life over the long run. In the short run it might cost you and cost you dearly. In the long run, you will always be glad you lived the Christian life.”

Making the two magic questions work

It is always in our best interest to live the Christian life. It is always in our best interest to:

- Forgive when we are tempted to hang onto our bitterness.
- Serve when we would rather not.
- Give when we would rather spend on ourselves.
- Pray when we would rather sleep in.
- Your job, as a teacher is to get your students in touch with this. Your job is to make them believe it. We do this by asking two magic questions:
 - How will it benefit you to live for God?
 - What will it cost you if you don't live for God?

So, imagine several topics where this might work:

Forgiving:

- How does it benefit the forgiver to forgive?
- What does it cost us if we don't forgive?

Serving

- How does it help us to help others?
- How does selfishness cost us?

Giving

- How is it that "it will be given to us" as we give? (Luke 6.38)
- How do the stingy harm themselves?

Prayer

- Describe a time when prayer became for you a sweet hour.
- How would you describe what happens to our soul as we neglect prayer?

Why don't we get this?

You might think that if we are naturally predisposed to pursue what is in our best interest, and if it is always in our best interest to live the Christian life, that we would naturally and normally—somewhat automatically—live the Christian life. Why don't we?

Why don't we live the Christian life easily if we tend to pursue what is good for us and it is good for us to follow God? I have asked a number of groups this question. The most lucid answer I have had came from a pastor, "Because people are stupid, that's why!" Well, that pretty well says it.

2 Corinthians 4.4 teaches that the evil one blinds our eyes. He makes what is bad for us look good. He puts the poison in sugar. People are blinded. The people you teach are blinded. Your job is to open their eyes. Your job is to convince them to the core of their beings that is always, always, always in our best interest to live the Christian life.

Testimony Questions

There is nothing like an example.

Obviously, you could just tell them:

- Here are five steps to being consistent in your daily quiet time
- Here are three keys to effective financial management
- Here are four principles that will help us to raise godly children

You could just tell them, but it is inherently more interesting to ask them. Let them tell their story. Let them share.

- How did you come to enjoy consistency in your daily quiet time?
- What has God taught you about effective financial management?
- What do you think it takes to raise Godly children?

If you have some points and you want to make sure they are covered, keep the list in front of you. If your group does not mention one of the things on the list, you can participate in the conversation. Add your point. You will be surprised how seldom this is necessary. You will also be surprised how often people will come up with some truly brilliant answers that are not on your list.

But, testimony questions do more than make class more interesting. They make class more life-changing.

How God changes us

Anyone interested in teaching would do well to give some careful thought to how God changes people. Check the spiritual temperature of the average church goer and you will see that we are not doing as well at this as most of us would like. We are not creating fire-breathing, God-loving, bible-reading, money-sharing, people-serving disciples. At least not consistently. The question is why? How does God change people and how are we missing it?

Let's look at some of the popular approaches and some strengths and weaknesses of each

Discipleship by hanging around

This is the most common approach to discipleship. It assumes that if people hang around church long enough, they will become disciples.

This is not altogether untrue. If people hang around church, they will hear some teaching, hopefully some good teaching. This teaching will transform their thinking. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds.

They will not only be taught they will be loved. Love changes people. They will be challenged to act. They will be given opportunities to serve. Lots of good things will happen if people will hang around at church.

I was talking to a friend recently who was bemoaning the fact that we don't have in our churches a systematic and thought-through process of turning sinners into saints. We have not thought through a simple path to move people from where they are to becoming fully devoted followers of Christ. I pushed back: "That may be true, but the odd thing is this: you and I consider ourselves to be disciples and somehow we got here. Somehow we became disciples and we didn't have a clearly delineated plan to become disciples, yet, we became disciples. Somehow our messy approach does produce results.

Results, but probably not as consistently as most people would like.

Behavior modification

Somewhere along the line we realize that teaching is about application. It is about making doers of the word and not hearers only. We must constantly ask our listeners, "What do you want to do about what you heard to day?" Without a

rigorous and consistent emphasis on application we run a great risk of, on a good day, making smarter sinners, and, on a bad day, doing no good at all. On a really bad day, we turn people toward becoming Pharisees. Application is a critical component of all effective teaching. Most teaching would greatly improve by doubling or quadrupling the emphasis on application.

But, this approach to teaching has a problem. If we are not careful, we are simply saying to people, “You are sinning and you need to quit!”

- You need to be consistent in your quiet time.
- You need to quit eating so much and exercise more.
- You need to find a place to serve according to your giftedness.
- You really need to quit smoking.

That last one provides a good illustration. You need to quit smoking. Of course they need to quit smoking. Don't you think they know they need to quit smoking? One problem: they can't quit smoking. And they can't figure out how to be consistent in their quiet time either. And they can't figure out how to forgive in the really important matters. The list goes on. They would like to, they just don't seem to be able to. They have tried many times, but discipline alludes them.

This raises another question: what is the difference between this kind of emphasis on application and old-fashioned worldly behavior modification? To hear some people teach, we ought to be able to live the Christian life without God: just try hard, work at it, be disciplined.

Others teach a more passive approach: let go and let God. Just get out of the way and let God work through you. Whatever else we say about Christian living, a casual reading of the New Testament would reveal it is not passive. Paul spoke of striving, running, pushing, stretching. These are not passive concepts.

Beliefs drive behavior

There is a simple and easy-to-understand reason we do what we do. We do what we do because we believe it is in our best interest to do so. We are irrevocably hard-wired to pursue what we believe to be in our best interest. Beliefs drive behavior. There is a world of difference between disciplining yourself to have a quiet time and coming to understand what the hymn writer had in mind when he wrote the words, "Sweet hour of prayer." Prayer either become a sweet time for us or we don't do it. Which is it for you?

Behavior modification can never work without belief modification. We must come to believe something different

and we will come to behave differently. Beliefs always drive behavior.

Next question: what drives beliefs?

Beliefs are supported by the people in our reference group
We tend to believe what the people in our group believe. We tend to believe what our reference groups beliefs.

A great deal of research has also been done on the concept of social proof--the idea that most people follow the crowd.

- One researcher discovered that if he artificially increased the number of times a song was downloaded, that song was downloaded even more. People like to buy what everyone else is buying--that is why we pay attention to the best sellers lists.
- Candid Camera featured an episode called, "face the rear" where an unsuspecting man gets onto an empty elevator. Soon, the elevator begins to fill up. What the man doesn't know is that everyone in the elevator were part of the Candid Camera cast. They were all instructed to face the rear of the elevator when they boarded. After the fifth person faced the rear, the original man also faced the rear.
- One experiment featured a number of versions all centered around people coming into a doctor's office.

Everyone in the waiting room waits quietly for a while, then gets up and does something bizarre. First, one at a time, they get up, grab a pencil, and break it. One by one, each person does this, until, you guessed it, the original man gets up and breaks a pencil as well.

- In a similar experiment, people in the doctor's office got up and tore off a page from a calendar. Sure enough, the original man gets up and tears off a page as well.
- In the most extreme example, people were instructed to sit quietly for a while, then stand up and undress down to their underwear. One by one, everyone in the room undressed to their underwear. (They were all men.) Unbelievably, the subject of the experiment does so as well.

Think about your own life. . .

- When did you start using a DVD player, when you saw it in a store? When you read technical reviews? When all your friends did? When you could no longer rent or buy VHS tapes?
- When did you start using email? When you read the specs or when a friend told you about it?
- If you were to move to a new town and were looking for a church, what would be more likely to persuade you, a billboard or the recommendation of a friend?

The odd thing is, it doesn't feel like this to us. If I asked you, "Do you make decisions based primarily on the merits of the issue at hand, weighing out the pros and cons for yourself, or do you just follow the crowd?" Most people will say they do not follow the crowd, they make independent, objective and thoughtful decisions. The research strongly suggests, however that most people are not reading the information about what to buy and wear and where to buy what they wear. Most people talk to their friends.

Imagine this

Imagine three classrooms. The same question is asked in each: How did you learn to eat healthfully and exercise regularly?

Room #1:

In room #1 you find a room full of overweight and unhealthy people. They laugh out loud at the question.

Room #2:

This room is the exact opposite. It is filled with muscular, athletic, health-nuts. They jump on the question, all trying to out-do each other with the best story. They all exercise for more than an hour a day and the consistently eat healthful

foods. They make references to books and magazine and articles and web sites that you have never heard of.

Room #3:

This room is filled with normal people: people like you. They are about your age, your build, your stage in life. There is a slight pause after the question is raised, then one person, to your right, speaks up. "It was about five years ago for me. My dad died of a heart attack at age fifty-eight. I want to live long enough to see my grand kids grow up. I started exercising and eating better about five years ago. I don't do it perfectly, but I do far better than I did. I have lost about thirty pounds and have kept it off for five years now. My deal is tennis. I had to find an exercise I enjoyed. I joined a local tennis club and play about three or four times a week. I feel better, and my wife tells me I look better."

Let's imagine five other people speak up with similar testimonies. One after another someone speaks up and talks about how they won the battle of the bulge and how they are so much happier now. These are not marathon-running jocks. They are just normal people like you that have found a way to joyfully work exercise into their lives. They have come to love eating right and their bodies show it.

How do you feel after leaving room #1?

How do you feel after leaving room #2?

How do you feel after leaving room #3?

Room #4

Now, imagine a fourth room. In this room, there are no testimonies. No one talks about how they are doing. The teacher give some helpful information on steps to healthy living. They are all steps you heard before: eat right, get enough exercise, etc. All stuff you have heard before. All stuff you could have taught. All stuff you know you should do. All stuff you don't do.

How do you feel after leaving room #4?

Conclusion

If you are normal, one of the most persuasive influences in our life is the influence of our reference group. The question for most of us is not so much about what is right or what we believe as much as it is about what the people in our group practice. By accenting the positive behavior of some in your group, you draw the rest of the group along.

- Some people in your group are having a quiet time, let them share.
- Some people are ministering according to their giftedness, let them share.
- Some are tithing and beyond. Let them share.
- Some are exercising and eating right. Let them share.

What are the obstacles? Questions

There is a reason we do what we do. More importantly, there are reasons we don't do what we don't do. We know the goal. We know the prize. We know what we should do. What is keeping us from it? Until we discover and eliminate that we are swimming with heavy weights on. When we discover and eliminate the obstacles, life starts to become easy. Christian living becomes possible. Here are some examples of what are the obstacles questions:

- What keeps us from living a worry-free life?
- What keeps us from being more loving than we are?
- What keeps us from joy?

Often these question can be asked in a linear way that gets deeper and deeper at the issue. Like peeling back the layers of the onion, the deeper we go, the more we cry.

Why don't we double?

I work full time training and challenging Sunday School teachers to double every two year or less. One question I have asked myself a million times is, "Why doesn't it happen already? Why doesn't it happen routinely? Why doesn't it happen all the time?"

I can show you examples of where doubling groups is happening routinely, and it is resulting in explosive growth. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that there is an unprecedented movement of doubling groups going on right now. God is up to something in a big way.

Henry Blackaby taught us that if you want to follow God what you must do is discover where God is at work and join Him in what He is doing. One thing God is doing is orchestrating a global movement of doubling groups. I could write a book on that. In fact, I have written a book on that, but it is not the topic of this book. The question is, why doesn't it happen all the time?

When I ask this question, most people can think of one or two answers. I want to illustrate how asking, pushing, and asking some more can reveal more and more obstacles in the way of any goal, using the goal of doubling groups as an example.

1. We don't know how

My core assumption for many years was that teachers did not know how to double. I spent all my time teaching a five step strategy on how to double a class:

Teach a half-way decent lesson each and every week. Nothing less will do. You don't have to be Chuck Swindoll. It does have to be half way decent

Invide every member and every prospect to every fellowship every month. I teach a party-driven strategy. I have seen it happen more times than I could count that if we can get them to the party, we could not keep them from class.

Give Friday nights to Jesus to an informal time of Diet Coke, coffee cake and card playing

Encourage the group toward ministry. We need everyone in the group involved in this process of doubling groups.

Reproduce your group. Doubling a group is not so much about going from ten to twenty as much as it is about going from one group to two.

There is a five step strategy for doubling groups. I have taught this hundreds of times to tens of thousands of teachers. Why isn't it happening all the time? Is it just that we don't know how? Or, are there other reasons?

2. We didn't realize the significance

Another reason groups are not doubling is we don't think of the significance. We thought doubling was about taking my happy group of thirty and splitting it up into two grumpy groups of ten. We didn't realize that a group of ten that doubles every eighteen months or less can reach a thousand people in ten years. Go ahead, check out the math for yourself.

3. We didn't think it was possible

Reaching a thousand people in ten years doesn't sound possible. It doesn't sound realistic. In my seminars I tell story after story of where it really is happening.

4. None of our fellow teachers are doubling

We are profoundly influenced by what social scientists call social proof—in lay terms—peer pressure. We think of it affecting kids, but there is a preponderance of evidence that suggests that everyone is strongly influenced by the people in our reference group. For most teachers, the teachers in their reference group don't double, so they don't double. Recently I have been video taping the stories of teachers who have doubled in order to overcome this obstacle.

5. The pastor doesn't model it

I heard an Andy Stanley sermon recently where he stood before his people and say again as he has said many times,

“Our group started up three weeks ago. [Their groups take a summer break at Northpoint. This message delivered late summer--August, I think. So, what he means, in context is, “our group started up from our summer break.”] We are dividing this fall. Sandra says every time, “This is the best group we have ever had, I wish it never had to end.” And, it has been an incredible, incredible group I wish it wouldn't come to an end, but every eighteen months or so, my wife and I, we divide our group and start new groups, because we are so committed to this.

As I reflected on this, it occurred to me that this is the only time I have ever heard a pastor say this. I have never heard a pastor stand before his people and say, “I am in a group that is committed to doubling; I want you to be in a group that is committed to doubling.”

Surely one of the reasons this is not happening already is because pastors are not modeling and vision casting about doubling groups. Nothing is important till the pastor says it is important.

Why don't pastors say it is important?

6. Pastors are told to think about the stage

Most conferences for pastors emphasize what pastors do. They emphasize the preaching. Or, the talk about what kind of music we should have. They talk about the stage. They talk about what pastors should do. Pastors are not being taught to stand before their group and say, “I am in a group that is doubling; I want you to be in a group that is doubling.”

7. We think it will all work out anyway

There is a common sentiment that “If we don’t do what we are supposed to do, God will raise someone else up and it will all get done anyway.” I don’t have time to go into it now, but let me just say, I disagree with that statement. There may be some things that God will raise up someone else to do, but I believe there are many things that if I don’t do them they just won’t get done.

8. We think it will compete with our happiness

“But I am happy as I am.” You will be happier if you are in a movement of doubling groups.

9. We have other things that God has called us to do

I hesitate to admit this, but there might be other callings besides doubling a group for some people. Doubling a group might not be the calling for some.

This may be true in some cases, it may be true in many cases. But being part of a group is basic to the Christian life. Being part of a group that wants to live out the five purposes of the church is basic. A common, bread and butter strategy for many is to be in a group that doubles.

10. We are too busy

I have a shocking answer to this one: don't spend so much time at church. Many church members are spending Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night at church, and we can't figure out how to make time to give Friday nights to Jesus. Here is a thought: cut something out. Don't go on Sunday night. Stay home on Wednesday night.

Rick Warren taught us that there are five purposes of the church and we do well to giving some thought to balancing them all. Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night are about discipleship and worship and fellowship. We might do well to cut out one of those nights and spend it on ministry and evangelism.

If I were your pastor, I would invite you to move this up, way up, in your priority structure. I would invite you to make it your second church priority. First, is Sunday morning. Second is giving Friday nights to Jesus. Then, if you have time you can come on Sunday night or Wednesday night.

Another option is to repurpose Sunday night. Make it a night of outreach fellowships where each class has a party and they invite recent visitors, absentees and prospects to the dinner.

11. Life gets in the way

Why don't we double? Life. Kids. Soccer. Bills. Lawns. Work. Life gets in the way.

12. It just doesn't matter to us

This is the one I don't know how to get past. I don't know how to make people care. Sadly, in many cases this is the problem.

Conclusion

When I asked the question, "Why aren't we doubling already, you probably thought you knew the answer. It probably didn't feel like all that of significant of a question. The more you

keep asking, “Why? Why? Why? Why is that true, why not?” the more obstacles you will uncover. Unless we uncover those obstacles, we won’t remove them and they will block our progress. We will have to deal with all of those obstacles if we want to see a doubling group movement.

It is true in every arena. What are the obstacles to having a daily quiet time. Make a long list. Add some more things to it. Think about it some more. Make it longer. Then, address each of those issues. This is the only way we will get people in a daily quiet time.

Two follow-up questions to what are the obstacles questions work like this:

- Which of these are the biggest obstacles for you personally?
- How can we remove these obstacles?

Pushing harder is seldom the answer in any arena. You have to get the rocks out of the way. Once you do, you come to understand the words of Jesus when he spoke of an easy yoke.

Commitment Question

All lessons end in the same place. Regardless of the topic, no matter the text, all lessons end with the same question:

What do you want to do about what you heard today?

There are several key words in this sentence. Let's look at a few of them.

What do you want to do about what you heard today?

Application is general. We have been there: what are ten ways we could apply this to our lives. The freedom from commitment is important at that stage because it frees the mind to be creative. By thinking of all the ways we could apply, we are not burdened down by having to ask if we want to do this or that. But, somewhere along the way, we have to narrow the focus. We need to pick one or two things from the list that we want to do.

Commitment is personal. It is not general. It is my and God and what am I going to do. Not "What should Christians do to clean up the environment?" Not, "What should politically active people do about abortion?" Not, "What should the church do to be more effective evangelistically. The question is: what are you going to do about what you heard today?

What do you want to do about what you heard today?

Based on the cost/ benefit that we have looked at today, what do you want to do? Not. . .

- What do you think you should do?
- What does your wife want you to do?
- What do good Christians do?

The question is, “What do you want to do?”

In the long run, people do what they want. Christian teaching is about changing what people want to do. If we don't change what they want to do, we don't change them enough. Effective teaching gets people in touch with their God-given passions.

Good passions must overcome bad passion. We overcome evil with good.

- We overcome stinginess by getting people in touch with their desire to be a generous person. Don't you want to be a generous person? Aren't all the people you admire in this world generous people?
- We overcome inappropriate sexual desire by getting people in touch with their desire to be pure. How do you feel about adulterers? Do you want to be one? Do you want your kids to think of you that way?
- We overcome laziness by embracing the benefits of

diligence. Every goal we have takes work. I want to do some things. I want to accomplish some things. Laziness won't get me there.

Effective teaching gets people in touch with what they want—really want to do with their lives. Effective teaching changes people's "wants."

What do you want to do about what you heard today?

It isn't about what you think or whether you agree or what your opinion is. The question is, "What are you going to do about it?" There are two ways to go at this.

Baby steps

Sometimes we fail to live the Christian life because it is so daunting. We have been fat and out of shape our whole lives and now you tell me to make a decision to live a healthy life? Really?

Sometimes, you do better to ask for baby steps.

- Could you cut out French Fries?
- Could you take a fifteen minute walk before work?
- Could you, just for this week, have fruit around the house as a snack?

Did you see the movie What About Bob? This was the mantra of the character played by Bill Murray: Baby steps; baby steps.

Small difference can make a big difference over time. Tiny, incremental differences can make a huge difference. One percent improvement per week in almost anything will make radical differences in a year. The problem is we sometimes don't change at all. I know churches that have not changed in years. Their service is the same. The music is the same. The building is the same. Everything is the same. Small changes can make a big difference is consistently implemented.

Small changes are doable. Small changes don't scare us. Small changes we can handle. But, not too small. Remember the narrow way.

If the change is too small it doesn't challenge us and we don't find any motivation for it. The challenge to loose one pound this year may be doable, but it doesn't motivate us. Find the narrow way. Find a challenge that is big enough to challenge, but small enough to be within our grasp.

Ask for the big order

Sometimes, we don't need to ask for baby steps at all.

Sometimes we need to ask for the big order. Sometimes we need to make the big ask. Generally speaking, most Sunday School teachers are too timid. They don't make the big ask.

Change is sometimes incremental, like erosion. But, often times change is all-at-once, like an earthquake. Suddenly everything is different.

I have heard teachers make compelling arguments for tithing for example. They provide the biblical exposition. They talk of the reasonableness of it. They speak of the cost and the benefit. Everything is moving along nicely until it comes time to land the plane. The closing goes like this: "Maybe some of you have heard what we talked about today and it is too much for you. You can't imagine giving 10% of your income away. You have too much debt, too much financial pressure and you just can't get there. Here is what I recommend. Start giving something today. Something. Anything. Some small little something. One year from now, make a commitment to start giving 1% of your income, then 2% a year later, and so on. Ten years from now, you will be tithing."

I have asked hundreds of teachers if they tithe and if that is how they got to tithing. It has happened, but it is pretty rare.

Most people who tithe got there because someone made the big ask. Someone asked for them to give not 10% to God by 100% to God. The 10% is just a reminder that it all belongs to God.

What do you want to do about what you heard today? You can't change everything all at once. You can't ask people to get in shape, start having a quiet time, start sharing their faith, start tithing and discover their spiritual gift all at once. It is what I call the dead bug syndrome: if you ask me for too much all at once I freeze up and just lie there like a dead bug with my arms and legs up in the air.

The question is not, "What do you want to do about all the commands in the Bible?" The question is, "What do you want to do about what you heard today."

Matthew 18 says, "If your brother sins against you. . ." Notice that "sins" is singular. One sin. Deal with one sin at a time. If you ask me to be more grateful, more generous, more kind and more diligent all in one day, I just freeze up like a dead bug.

It is not all about doing

Christian living is not all about doing right. It is also about feeling right and believing right. The commitment question, then, could be about any of these:

- What do you want to do about what you heard today?
Or
- What beliefs do you want to turn from based on what we have talked about today?
- What feelings do you want to cultivate? Do you want to become a person who feels more grateful or content or loving?

Conclusion

It is often said that effective teaching is all about application. That is not exactly right. Application is a necessary first step, and a step that a lot of teachers don't take. But the next step is even more important: the commitment question.

Based on what we have said in this chapter, how do you want to change your teaching this weekend? Be specific and personal.

Accountability Questions

This question is mentioned last because it is last in terms of logical order. But, it may happen first in the class, and it may be the most important question you ask. Accountability questions go like this:

What did you do about what you heard last week?

The sad truth is, most of us didn't do anything. We say that small groups are about changing lives, but are they really changing very much? Here is the question: how much do you think the average small group member has changed because of their small group in the past six months? How many could name specific, observable change that has take place in the last six months. Write your answer here:

Let's be honest. In what ways has your life changed in the last six months because of something that happened in your small group? Write your answer here:

In what ways have you seen positive, specific changes in the lives of your students because of something that happened in group in the last six months? Write your answer here:

Did you struggle to come up with anything? Congratulations! You have a normal group. In my experience, this is typical. Sad, but pretty common.

A new vision for your group

What if we went at group a different way. What if, instead of teaching on a variety of topics and texts that went into detail of various word studies and background and what not—all good stuff. What if we went at it this way. What if we were to consider a number of possible goals for the next three to six months for our class members. Consider these possibilities.

- We want our group members to have a daily quiet time.
- We want our group members to memorize one verse a week and be able to recall the last twelve verses.
- We want our members to be able to tell the story of the Old Testament without notes in about five or ten minutes.

- We want our group members to follow biblical practices of handling money. We want them to have less debt six months from now than they have today.
- We want our group members to know their gifts and be ministering according to their giftedness.

We could go on and on with this list, but I think you get the idea. Now. Pick one. Pick one goal for the next three months. Let's say we pick the first one: we want our group members to have a daily quiet time.

Let's have some fun. Let's imagine that I could pay you a million dollars if three months from now eighty percent of your members were having a quiet time eighty percent of the time. (And, no, you can't pay them part of your million.) What would you do?

What I would do would have a lot to do with accountability.

I would come up with thirteen topics that had to do with the goal of getting everyone to have a quiet time. These topics might include:

- How to have a quiet time
- Quiet time in the life of Jesus
- Overcoming obstacles to having a quiet time
- Sweet hour of prayer: learning to love prayer
- Why God sometimes says no

- The reliability of the Word
- The treasure of the Word
- Praying the Lord's prayer
- Prayer is not just about asking
- Three good Bible reading plans
- The power of habit
- Biblical meditation
- Scripture memory and prayer
- The benefits and limitations of discipline
- When Bible reading seems boring

Next, I would develop lessons on each of these topics. That is the easy part. The real key is this: I would be willing to set the lessons aside in favor of accountability. Every week I would prepare a lesson, but I would start the group by asking how we did this week in our quiet time. I would model this by having a consistent quiet time myself and sharing with the group how God spoke to me in my quiet time this week. Then I would ask how God spoke to them this week. I would let them share. If the conversation got good, I would let them share for a long time. I might even set aside my lesson if the conversation got good enough.

I would fully expect that in the early weeks few people might be having a quiet time. (This would vary quite a bit depending on the maturity of the group.) As each week went by, I would see a few more people having a quiet time, and those that

are having a quiet time would get gradually more consistent. Accountability is the key to seeing this happen.

I would not get lazy and just not prepare a lesson on the hope that the conversation would get good enough. I would prepare a lesson each week, then listen and use my judgment, listening for the prompting of the Holy Spirit as to how much sharing and how much teaching would be useful to the group this week.

We would also spend a little time each week talking about why we are not having a quiet time. We would brainstorm together ways to overcome obstacles to having a quiet time. We would rehearse the benefits of having a quiet time based on the joy that we are all experiencing in our time alone with God.

This scenario is not theory to me. I have done it many times and I can tell you it is not that difficult to get 80% of your people having a quiet time 80% of the time if you hold them accountable.

I believe you could do this with most any discipleship goal you could imagine. Pick one area of life change that you are after. Go after it for as long as it takes. Hold people accountable. Watch the results before your eyes. Where you

don't have results, ask why. Discover obstacles. Remove obstacles. Solve problems. Find solutions. Provide encouragement.

It is this process that is at heart of life changing groups like Weight Watchers. They hold be accountable. We all know how to loose weight. Weight Watchers may teach some helpful things on how to loose weight but the main thing they do is provide an atmosphere of accountability.

Most of us know what we ought to do. We ought to read our bibles. We ought to pray. We ought to give. We ought to live in authentic community and deep fellowship with one another. We ought to know our gifts and serve in the area of our giftedness. We ought to, we ought to we ought to, but many don't. Why? It is not because they do not know. It is because they are not held accountable.

Can we do this in an open group?

There are two kinds of groups: open groups and closed groups. Open groups are ya'll come groups. They are open to outsiders. They are for outreach. Closed groups—sometimes called discipleship groups—are for developing believers.

Many believe we can have accountability in a discipleship group, but not in a Sunday School-style open group.

It is true that you can set the bar too high. You can set the bar so high that it intimidates and runs off new comers. Imagine you are in a group that is holding one another accountable for scripture memory. At the beginning of the group, everyone gets into pairs and each person rattles off a dozen or so verses-near word-perfectly. This is great for discipleship, but not so good for outreach.

Maybe you can't set the bar that high, but you can have some accountability, even in open groups. I did a series on the book of Proverbs once. We started with the observation that there are thirty-one chapters in Proverbs and thirty-one days in a long month. I suggested that if you were not reading anything else, you might consider reading the Proverb of the day. Each week I shared my own reading, and asked the group if they had read any from the Proverb of the day that week. By the end of the course everyone was reading the Proverb of the day.

But, here is the real point. This is accountability that does not run off newcomers. If you had visited the group two months into it you would have found that many of us were sharing from our reading of the Proverb of the day. Is this

intimidating? Not for most people. Accountability can be done in an open group.

Conclusion

Accountability is the missing ingredient in most groups. Most people need accountability. Most church-goers know what they should do. They don't do it because they are not being held accountable. You can do accountability in an open group. The bar cannot be too high, but you can do accountability in an open group. It is not likely that we will every make disciples without accountability.

The Heart of a Teacher

I think it is an unfortunate thing that you are called a teacher. Since you are called a teacher, you might have the idea that your job is to teach. I have never talked to a Pastor or Small Group Minister anywhere that felt that the sole job of a teacher was to teach.

You are a shepherd. You are a coach. You are a mentor. You are a friend. You are the pastor of a microcosm of the church.

Your job is not to just deliver information, you are to pray for, care about, visit in the hospital, remember birthdays, hug the babies, and love the people. You are to take on the attitude that Paul had toward the Thessalonians:

- But we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.
- For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, 1 Thes. 2:7-8, 11 [NIV]

What is a group, anyway?

- The church exists on several levels:
- World-wide invisible church where Billy Graham and James Dobson serve on staff
- Local church
- Micro-church. This is a small group or Sunday School class.

In the New Testament we read where the church met in temple courts and from house to house (Acts 5.42). We tend to focus on the geography—where they met—but I want us to focus on the type of group. These were small groups and large groups and the church needs both.

Notice it was the church that met house to house. I read in my quiet time this morning about “Nympha and the church in her house.” Col. 4:15 [NIV] Again, don’t focus on where the met. Note that this was the church. This was not a group of people from the church. It was not an organization of the church. It was the church.

We commonly see a different perspective from this today as we hear people say, “Are you going to Sunday School today, or just church?” Do you hear what the question is implying? The worship service is church. Sunday School, well, that is optional. This is not the New Testament perspective.

It would be more biblical to say, “Are you going to big church today or little church or both? Are you going to all of church or part of church?” Church is when we meet in small groups.

I would argue that most of what it means to really be the church—most of the one another stuff happens in, through and around small groups. Most of the loving one another, serving one another, bearing with one another and so forth happens in the micro-church, not at the congregational level.

At the micro-church level, you are the pastor.

Just as your pastor spends part of his time in content preparation and delivery, you need to spend part of your time in content preparation and delivery. But, that is not all you are called to do. You are called to pastor that micro-church. You are called to make the group of people into a microcosm of the church.

The heart of a teacher, then, is the heart of a pastor.