

# Hand-Crafted Application Questions

*Make sure your material fits your group members.*

By Rick Lowry

I've been leading small groups for about 40 years. When I began back in the 70's, not many printed materials existed for groups. Most of what was available was fact-oriented: "To whom was Jesus speaking when he said, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men'?" (Back then it was also difficult for group members to handle the stone tablets the lessons were written on!)

Today, we've moved way beyond "just the Bible facts" to an era of application. Group members have come to expect an answer to the question, "What do I need to do about this tomorrow morning?" as a normal part of any Bible study. These days I have a wide range of application-oriented study guides to choose from. No small-group leaders in the history of the church have had better tools available, and everything comes as quickly as the touch of a computer mouse or a smart phone.

But even though I have many published studies to choose from, when it comes to the very special people in my own small group, I find that I often need to think of application questions that suit their specific needs and current life situations. Maybe you're the same way?

If so, use the following guidelines to create effective application questions that are tailored specifically for the needs of your group.

## **Think F.O.R.M.**

The most effective application questions include things that almost everybody is interested in and have in common with others. The acronym F.O.R.M. is a good place to start as you prepare for the application section of your lesson:

- *Family.* Most people like to talk about their family. It might be their immediate family, their extended family, their adopted family, or their church family. Here are some examples:
  - How can we act on the guideline Paul gives us here to "serve one another in love" when it comes to our spouses and children?
  - This passage says for husbands to "love your wives as Christ loved the church." Are there any men here who can give some everyday examples of situations where husbands can act on this? (And if you really want to have fun, let wives offer their ideas when the husbands are done!)
  - As members of a church family, how can we "bear one another's burdens"?
- *Occupation.* Since our jobs are where we spend most of our time, we are always looking for ways to live out our faith at work. Think of questions like these:
  - How do Paul's instructions to slaves relate to the modern-day workplace?
  - What attitudes does Joseph model for us as a worker under the supervision of his masters/bosses?
  - Can you think of a work situation where we can practice Paul's challenge: "Don't take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath"?
- *Religion.* Finding application questions about our faith helps keep the study moving in a spiritual direction. Here are some examples:
  - Ephesians says that we have "access" to God. Let's have some volunteers talk about how they thought about God when they were growing up.
  - This passage in Acts 8 tells about a man who was baptized. How does his baptism experience parallel yours? How is it different?
  - James says that pure religion is visiting orphan and widows in their distress. What are some of the viewpoints about "pure" religion that people embrace today? How do they differ from the ideal James suggests?

- *Motivation.* If you have been leading your group for a while, you have begun to know the heart of each group member. What is it that really motivates them? What is the thing that gets their adrenaline going?
  - Tom, you enjoy sports and athletic activities. What do you think of when Paul tells us to "run in such a way as to get the prize"?
  - I know that many of you have a real burden for the poor. Tell us what you think this group might do to apply what Jesus says here about the sheep and the goats.

### **Help People Tell Their Stories**

Application becomes action when people can see how to live out this passage in their own daily life.

- Can anyone think of a time when God called you to "sell your possessions and give to the poor"?
- Has God ever led you to talk to an unlikely person about Christ? Did you resist?

### **Combine Application and Accountability**

It's easy to talk about "how this passage might be lived out," but it's much harder to declare what I am going to do this week to live it out. Actions speak louder than words.

For example, it's not very helpful to say: "I hope everyone is reading through the Bible this year." But you can gain a lot more traction in terms of application with: "We've all said we plan to read through the Bible this year. How about if I make it a weekly question in our meeting to ask how everyone is progressing with their Bible reading?"

Also, don't be afraid to incorporate accountability into a discussion about specific temptations and sins. "This passage says not to get drunk on wine but to be filled with the Spirit. If anyone here is struggling with an addiction that you'd like us to pray about, now would be a good time."

### **Be Specific**

Try to avoid vague or general questions like, "How can Christians today pray without ceasing?" A better option would be: "What step could we take this week to live in a spirit of prayer in our daily lives?"

### **Don't Be Afraid to Ask the Hard Questions**

People rise to a challenge, including your group members. So try to avoid application questions and activities that are "milk and toast" (Hebrews 5). Things like: "Paul says we should be servants; what if we all sign up to be greeters and take up the offering at worship?" Instead, go for the meat: "What's a way this week that I could serve a person I don't really like?"

The same is true for allowing jargon and "church phrases" to keep us from getting our hands dirty. Avoid a question like: "How can people be more committed to Christ?" On the other hand, this is a challenge: "Jesus says here in Luke that in order to follow him we have to give up everything we have. What specifically would you have to give up in order to truly follow Jesus?"

### **Be Sensitive to Teachable Moments**

It's important that you prepare well as a leader, and I recommend you have several key application questions written into your lesson. But be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as the discussion progresses. It's okay to create application questions "on the fly" as you sense what God is doing in each person's heart during the meeting.

One good way to do this is to quickly scan F.O.R.M. (see above) through your brain as you pick up on an important train of thought developing among group members.

### **Begin with the Bible**

Application is important, but make sure it's based on solid Bible teaching as its foundation. In a small group, we start with the Bible, then take action in daily life based on the truth of Scripture that we have learned. Application without Scripture is also milk without meat.

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