

Four Questions for Every Small-Group Bible Study

Regardless of what you're studying, these questions will help you dig in and connect with God.

By Jim Egli

A very common mistake that small-group leaders make in leading a Bible study is asking too many questions. When you ask too many questions, three things happen. First, the same one or two people answer all the questions. Second, you don't go in depth with the passage. And finally, your discussion takes too long, crowding out your time to pray for one another.

When you ask fewer questions and spend more time on each one, more people have a chance to share, you go deeper into the Bible, and you allow time to respond to God in prayer.

Have you ever noticed in the Gospels that Jesus' own small group was just like yours? Any time he asked a question the same person always answered first—Peter! Sometimes Peter's statements were brilliant (Mark 8:29) and at other times they were totally off the mark (Luke 22:33). By asking fewer questions and spending more time on each one, you give people time to reply. This requires you to have patience and to allow times of silence that give group members a chance to gather their thoughts and their courage to enter into the discussion. Don't dash through the questions. Stay on one for a while. Give people other than the Peters in your group a chance to respond.

One reason that we as leaders are tempted to ask too many questions is that most small-group discussion guides include too many questions. Often they will suggest as many as 20 questions. Your group doesn't have time to discuss even half that many. Instead, you should ask just a few questions, and that may require you to move through curricula or books of the Bible more slowly. A half of a chapter in the Bible tends to be more than enough to talk about.

In my 35 years of leading small groups, I keep coming back to the same four questions that help people delve into a text, apply it to their lives, and respond to God. These questions will work with any Bible passage. Here are the four questions that you should ask every time you lead a small-group discussion.

Question One: "What stands out to you in this passage?"

I love this question! There is no right or wrong answer. It invites anyone and everyone to jump into the discussion. People new to the Bible and Bible geeks—seekers, scholars, doubters, and dreamers—can share whatever they want. People can offer something goofy or something brilliant, a question or an insight. You never know what you might hear. At the same time, the things that surface in this part of the discussion are pivotal. People are facing struggles, grappling with questions, and learning lessons from the Holy Spirit—and these all have a chance to emerge when we ask this question.

I almost always use this exact wording. "What stands out to you in this passage?" But there are other ways to ask the same thing. Here are some variations:

- What do you like in this passage? What don't you like?
- What word or phrase strikes you in this passage?
- What question comes to your mind when you hear or read these verses?
- How does this passage speak to you right now?

Regardless of how you ask it, your goal is to invite people to look at the passage and listen and respond to it in new ways. Don't hurry to move to the next question. Let people engage with Scripture, with its themes, and with one another. Look around the room. Can you see the wheels spinning in someone's mind? Ask that curious, thoughtful person if he or she has something to share.

Sometimes people will ask challenging questions in this part of the study, or even flat out disagree with the Bible passage. When I first starting leading small groups, that scared me because I thought I needed to have answers or defend the Bible. Now I love honest questions and objections. I've learned that I don't need to have all the answers and that the best way to handle a tough question is to toss it back to the group and see if others have insights. I've learned that I don't ever need to defend the Bible because it is its own authority. Instead, my primary focus is on creating an atmosphere where people can express whatever questions, thoughts, or struggles are on their mind.

Question 2: "What do you think the main point of the passage is?"

This question invites your group to get to the heart of the passage. Again, there are different ways to ask it. You might reword it in different sessions or even ask the same question in different ways in the same session.

For example, you could also ask:

- What do you think Jesus (Paul, the psalmist, the writer) is really trying to say?
- What truth or truths are at the heart of this passage?
- How would you summarize the message of this passage in one sentence or one phrase?
- What do you think is the most important word in these verses?

Let the group dig in and discuss the central message of the passage and how it relates to life. Besides your question, others in the group might ask questions that they have. If these questions relate to the Scripture at hand and its theme, let them guide and shape your discussion.

If people get off topic with comments and questions, call them back to the passage after a brief time. You might say something like, "That was a great discussion. Now getting back to the passage . . ." followed by a repetition or variation of question two.

Once the key message of the passage has emerged in a clear and compelling way, it's time to move to the next question.

Question 3: "Can you illustrate this truth with an example from your own life?"

After the main point of the passage has become clear, you want to look at how it applies to your group members' everyday lives in powerful and practical ways. The most effective way to do this is to invite them to look at how they have seen evidence of the truth already playing out in their lives.

So for instance, in a study on Matthew 18:23–35, the main point that would emerge in questions one and two would be that we should forgive others because God has fully forgiven us. You might then phrase question three as: "Can you think of someone that you have been able to forgive, because of your realization of God's total forgiveness of you? Tell us a bit of that story."

Again, this question can be asked in different ways. The goal is to get people to share examples of the truth expressed in real life, whether in their own or others' lives. There are other ways to ask question three for Matthew 18:23–35:

- Can you think of someone who exemplifies God's generous forgiveness toward others? When have you seen them forgive?
- Can you think of a situation where you struggled to forgive someone but then were able to forgive? What helped you take this step? What practical difference did forgiving make in your own life?
- Whose story of forgiveness serves as an example or inspiration to you? Why?

The reason why I love question three is because it helps my group members take the powerful truths of the Bible and the nitty-gritty of their everyday experience and mix them together. This enables them to visualize the biblical principles and see how to apply them in their everyday lives in real ways.

After people have grappled with how the truth of the passage is fleshed out in their everyday lives, it's time for your final question.

Question 4: "What do you want to ask God for right now?"

With your final question you want to move people from looking at and listening to the passage to responding to God. This question intentionally asks, "What do you want to ask God for?" rather than, "What does it mean for you to obey this passage?" Here's why: Ultimately your group members need to come to God and respond to him, rather than responding to an abstract truth.

In John 5:39–40, Jesus says to a group of Bible thumpers: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

It is possible to focus too much on the Bible. The purpose of the Bible is to point beyond itself and lead us to Christ. The Bible itself, as wonderful as it is, does not give life or change our lives. Only God can do that. Teach your group to go to God.

It's okay to ask, "What does it mean for you to obey this passage?" or, "How does this truth apply to your life right now?" But a question like that can't be your final question. In effect, questions like that are part of question three or they serve to transition to your final question. In the end you must ask a question that helps people bring their needs and their struggles directly to God.

Again, there are different ways to ask this. Here are some possible questions that move people from looking at the passage to looking to God and responding to him:

- What do you need from God right now to live out this truth?
- How do you hear God speaking to you, encouraging you, or directing you, through this Scripture?
- As you think about what we have discussed, what is one thing you want to ask God for?
- How would you respond if Jesus asked you right now, "What do you want me to do for you?"

After you ask your final question, you might want to move into smaller groups to let people respond and pray for one another. Smaller groups allow more time for everyone to share and receive prayer. If I am leading a larger group, I often divide the group into groups of four or five, or have the men and women share with one another in different rooms. Research shows that for the purposes of both openness and comfort, five is the optimal number of people for these deeper sharing groups.

How to Lead a Great Bible Study

To summarize, don't ask too many questions. Take more time on fewer questions, allowing more people to share and giving the group the opportunity to go deeper into the passage and respond to God himself.

Four proven questions to use in every small group Bible study are:

1. What stands out to you in this passage?
2. What do you think the main point is?
3. Can you illustrate this truth with an example from your own life?
4. What do you want to ask God for right now?

You can and should vary how you ask these questions:

1. To help people delve into the passage.
2. To grapple with its central message.
3. To look at how it's lived out in everyday experience.
4. To guide them to God so that they can respond to and receive from him.

If you do these four things every time you lead a small-group Bible study, people's lives will be changed—including your own.

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Discuss

1. How many questions do you normally ask in a small-group meeting? Do you feel it's too many or too few?
2. How well do you touch on these four questions in your discussions? Do you tend to leave one (or more) out?
3. How well do you focus on the application side that brings group members to God with their needs and questions? How can you spend more time on this important step?