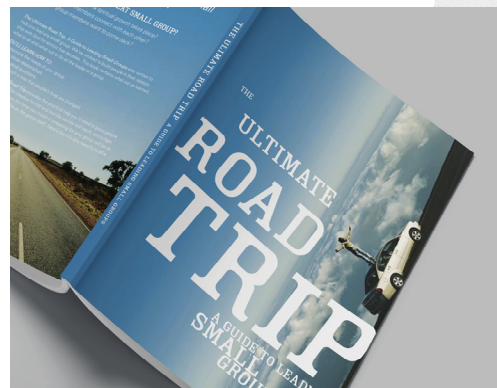


How to Ask Really Good Questions

Excerpt from *The Ultimate Roadtrip: Leading a Small Group* by **Rick Hove**.



Available at the CruStore.



CHAPTER 8

**20 QUESTIONS &
OTHER CAR GAMES**



8.1 DIFFERENT TYPES OF QUESTIONS

8.2 GUIDING A DISCUSSION

8.3 LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Wouldn't you hate it if your group members dozed off like they do in boring classes? They won't if you lead your group right. Small groups have virtually nothing in common with a lecture. A successful group offers people the chance to learn for themselves, through interaction and mutual involvement. When this happens the experience is far from boring.

In this section you'll learn the art and science of asking good questions and using learning activities to stimulate your group to learn for themselves.

8.1

DIFFERENT TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Broadly speaking there are three types of questions—open, closed and limiting. It's important to understand each type of question, because there are a variety of ways you can use them in guiding your group.

Closed questions.

Closed questions are pointed and obvious. They imply the answer the leader

expects. An example would be, “Paul says we are to rejoice in everything, doesn’t he?” Since they imply a “Yes” or “No” answer, there is little or no response from the group. Closed questions will inhibit group discussion and

ADVANTAGES OF ASKING QUESTIONS

- *Good questions make people think. When people think, they learn.*
- *Questions help you know whether the group is grasping the content. Without feedback you’ll never know what your group is learning.*
- *Questions keep the group interesting.*
- *Questions cause group members to learn more together than they would have on their own.*
- *Questions enable the leader to focus and direct the discussion.*
- *Group interaction helps relationships develop within the group, which in turn helps learning and application.*

fail to promote self-discovered learning or community. When group leaders don’t prepare they tend to naturally ask closed or limiting questions.

100

Limiting Questions.

Limiting questions limit the number of “correct” answers to a particular question. While closed questions should have no place in your small group, limiting questions can if they are used skillfully.

These questions cause the eyes of your group to look down to their Bible. For example, you may ask, “According to Ephesians 2:1-3, what does Paul say was true of every single one of us prior to coming to Christ?” The question is answered from the text and is not going to produce hearty discussion, but is necessary for uncovering the truth of the passage. And this discovery can lead to open-ended follow-up questions.

Open Questions.

Open questions don’t imply an answer and are quite helpful for promoting discussion. They cause a person to think and, hopefully, learn. An example of an open question would be, “What do most students think about Jesus Christ?” or, “What do you observe in this passage? What seems important?” Open questions encourage group participation. The answers can be broad and varied. Open questions are more difficult to prepare, but they help make for a lively discussion.

8.2

GUIDING A DISCUSSION

Group discussion is like a captivating, well-played volleyball game. As the leader, you serve the ball by asking a good question. Then someone answers, setting up the ball for someone else in the group to respond, who then hits the ball to another individual. When the volley is dead, you serve up another question. The goal is not simply to keep the discussion going, but to direct it in such a way as to facilitate learning and life-change.

It takes practice, preparation and hard work to play an exciting game of volleyball, and the same is true in making good group discussion work.

There are a variety of ways to use questions. For example, if you were summarizing a lesson, it might be appropriate to use a limiting question such as, “How would you summarize the main emphasis of this passage?” However, at the beginning of a lesson you would want a wide open question

101

POP QUIZ

What types of questions are these? How would you respond?

- *John the Baptist baptized people, didn't he?*
- *Why do you think many students struggle in their Christian life?*
- *Are we saved by grace through faith or works?*
- *In 1 Corinthians 15:3-6, Paul says Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to Peter, then to the twelve, then to 500 of the brothers, then to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all to whom?*
- *You're never going to please God without confessing your sins, right?*
- *How would you describe the attitude on campus toward homosexuals?*

such as, “Would you consider yourself a patient person? Why?” Note that although the first part of the question is limiting, it sets up the wide open question which asks people to share about their struggles with being patient. Here are some helpful ways to use questions:

Launching Questions

A good way to start a study is using a wide open question that raises an issue that your passage will address. This is not just a “get to know you” kind of question, but one that links to your passage and possibly touches on an aspect of our Fallen Condition that’s surfaced in the passage. For example:

- Describe a time in your life when you felt like you just couldn’t measure up? (A possible lead-in question to a study on grace or forgiveness.)
- Name a hero you had growing up. What made you want to be like him/her? (This could launch a study on, say, Ephesians 5 where Paul exhorts his readers to “imitate God” or a 1 Timothy 4 study on “setting an example.”)

Exploring Questions

After your launch question(s) and a brief summary of the passage, you will want to ask questions that help your group discover what God said. In order to arrive at the meaning of the passage, these questions should be both limiting and open-ended and should focus on the following:

102

What does it say? (observation questions)

- Ephesians 2:1-10, how does Paul describe the contrast between who they are now in Christ with who they once were?
- In Ephesians 2:4-7, what are the present realities of a believer’s relationship with God?

What does it mean? (interpretation questions)

- In Ephesians 2:2, what does it mean that we once walked according to the ways of the world?
- In Ephesians 2:5, what does it mean to be made alive with Christ? (In order to get at Paul’s meaning it would be helpful for your group to see the contrast between being “alive” and “dead in sin”.)

What does it matter? (significance questions)

- In light of Ephesians 2:1-3, what would the rest of your life look like if God hadn’t rescued you from your sin?

Before you move on to responding to Christ in application, you will want to help your group discover the big idea of the passage. Ask a question that helps them see the central theme or main point of the passage. For example:

- In Ephesians 2:1-10, what do you think Paul really wanted these believers to understand about grace?

Heart-level Response Questions

Your teaching will be most effective when it helps expose our Fallen Condition (a heart inclined toward finding life outside of a relationship with Christ) and when it points to Christ for the redemptive solution (chapter 5). Remember, you are not aiming at surface behavior, but rather, heart-level inclinations and motivations.

First, ask a couple questions that help them envision what it would look like to practically live out this passage. For example:

- In Ephesians 2:10, we are said to be Christ's workmanship. What should that look like in the life of a believer?

Next, ask a couple questions that expose heart-resistance to Christ. In other words, what is it in our Fallen Condition that is exposed in this passage? For example:

- Our culture tells us that we can become anything we want to become. How does this mindset subtly creep into your walk with God?

Next, ask a couple questions that point your group to Christ. What aspect of Christ's redemptive work do they need to believe and embrace in order to experience His grace and healing? For example:

- We often seek to control our future; why do we struggle with entrusting this to Christ? How would your life be different if you truly believed Jesus had only your best interest and greatest good in mind?

What you are attempting to do through these questions is to point them away from their natural proclivity to work harder at changing their behavior, and point them to Christ as the only source of growth and life. You can point them to Christ for forgiveness; you can point them to Christ for his empowerment to live the Christian life; you can point them to Christ to find hope in His promises; however you do it, point them to Christ.

Community and Conversation Questions

These are the questions that uncover the meaning of the text, the roots of our sin, and our response to Christ; these are the critical questions. That said, we don't want to undervalue all other types of questions you may ask.

As you ask heart-level questions, your Bible study should grow in authenticity, honesty, and community. But, it's also important to think through questions that are for the sole purpose of generating discussion and adding to the social dimension of the group. These are not insignificant. While your primary focus is for people to encounter Christ, you also need to make sure that they encounter one another, encountering Christ through community.

Becoming a Better Listener

Asking good questions is half the battle to having good discussion. Listening is the other half. When you listen as a leader, it shows you value the opinions and input of the group.

As you become a better listener, your questions become more pertinent and those in your group will more likely participate in the discussion. Here are some tips on how to accomplish this.

- Be an “in-their-shoes” listener, seeing the situation from their perspective. Try to understand the emotion expressed in their comments.
- Be an active listener. Your goal is to understand what the other person is communicating. If you are unclear about what they are trying to say, then rephrase in your own words what you believe was just said. This will give the other person a chance to correct you if you misunderstood the meaning. For example, “I’m not sure I caught that, Kristen. Let me see if I understand you. You think that Christians aren’t lonely because they have a relationship with God. Is that right?”
- Be an encouraging listener. Many people need affirmation of their comments before they’ll feel comfortable sharing anything more. Verbally respond to their questions and answers by saying something positive: “That answer shows you’re thinking.” “Great, that’s right ...” (repeat what they said).
- Be a “total body” listener. Maintain eye contact with the person speaking and be aware of your posture. Certain positions (like crossing your arms or leaning back in your chair) communicate less concern than other positions, like leaning.

8.3

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Good questions greatly aid self discovery, but there are other learning activities that further help you facilitate learning and application. These activities stimulate thinking and personal discovery and keep your group from being predictable. Try these out to add some variety and take your group to another level of learning.

1 Hypothetical Situation

Throw out a hypothetical situation for discussion related to the topic you are studying. This encourages group members to synthesize and apply what they're learning to a specific situation. For example:

- A friend comes to visit and you get into a discussion about Christianity. She comments, "I just can't buy Christianity because I don't see why Jesus is any more special than any other great religious leader." What would you say?
- Your boss asks you to lie to one of your customers or clients. What would you do?
- Your roommate who says he's a Christian didn't come home last night because he stayed at his girlfriend's apartment. What should you do, if anything?

2 Values & Culture

Tape a short section of a television show or movie (10-15 minutes maximum). Watch the clip and then discuss it from a biblical perspective. For example, you might examine how people make moral decisions, how they treat each other, what they value, what they think of Christianity, etc. You can do the same thing with popular songs, books, articles in the newspaper, etc.

3 Role Play

Act out a situation to identify with the characters. This is followed by a discussion of the scenario and the implications for the characters in the role play and to everyday life. The assignments for each of these roles are written out and

given to individuals in advance. For example:

- Have your group members role play sharing the gospel with a friend.
- Take a story from the Bible and have different group members act out the parts. For example, use the story of the leper who came to Jesus (Mark 1:40-45). Assign them to read or assume different roles, i.e., the leper, Jesus, the disciples, the on-lookers. After the role play, ask the group how they felt about the leper, disciples, etc. Then ask them how they might have felt if they were the leper, or any of the other main characters. Ask who they identified with in the scene, and explore what it teaches about the character of Jesus and how they feel about Him.



4 Debate

Divide the group into two teams and assign an opposing view to each team. Give each team time to come up with the best evidence for their position. Set some rules for the debate and have fun. Then summarize the key points and their implications. For example:

- Did Jesus rise from the dead or is the resurrection simply a religious myth?
- Is the Bible God's Word, or a collection of religious stories that contain human errors?
- Is Christ a good moral teacher or God in the flesh?
- Is homosexuality a God-honored preference or a distortion of God's intent?

Obviously if you are going to use a debate format you must be prepared and clearly understand the issue.

A variation of the debate format is to divide the group in two and have a mock court room scene. One side represents the prosecution (opposing view) and the other side the defense. Have each side prepare a case and then have a trial. Possible topics are the resurrection, the reliability of the Bible, or the deity of Christ.

In any small group things can and will go wrong. Here are three pieces of advice to help you. First, commit your group time to the Lord. Prepare your lesson and group time, trust Him with both, and then go have a good time. Second, learn to laugh at yourself. You'll make mistakes, so enjoy learning from them. Who has ever had a perfect group leader (besides the twelve disciples)? Third, love and care for those in your group. Caring goes a long way in making up for any mistakes you make.

5 *Brainstorming*

The leader presents a problem to members of the group, who then come up with possible solutions. Offer suggestions in rapid succession. No comments, evaluations or criticisms are allowed at this time. After the list is completed and following a predetermined time allotment, the suggested solutions are discussed by the group, and biblical support (if not done so previously) is presented for each solution (if such support exists). For example:

- You have been studying evangelism and want to try a creative outreach to your non-Christian friends. Brainstorm an evangelistic event you might have ... a party, a dinner, a lecture series, etc. Let your imaginations go wild. Brainstorm all you would need to do to pull it off, including jobs people would need to do.

6 *Demonstration*

Bring in a couple of outside people to demonstrate how to perform a certain task. Afterwards discuss what happened and allow the group members to ask questions and analyze what they saw. For example:

- Working through a disagreement with a friend or relative.
- Sharing the gospel with a friend.

107

7 *Research and Report*

Present a question, problem or issue to the group relating to the topic of study. Ask group members to look into it and report back next week. For example:

- Read the school newspaper and/or a news magazine and bring back any stories, articles, or comments that relate to a particular issue, such as love, sex, forgiveness, lying, etc.
- Give them some passages to examine over the week and have them report back on what the Bible says about a topic, such as premarital sex or self-control.
- Let them read a chapter from a book you suggest and report on it. For example, a chapter on the resurrection from *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Josh McDowell) or one on an attribute of God out of *Knowing God* (J.I. Packer).

8 *Storyboarding*

Similar to brainstorming, except a task is proposed for the group to accomplish and the suggestions for accomplishing it are recorded on sticky notes and placed in categories or in the order of performing the task. For example:

- Assign the group to write a talk on prayer. They must decide the purpose of the talk, the questions their audience might be asking about prayer, the various pieces of relevant available information, Bible verses to include, an outline, and interesting anecdotes from the group members. The leader keeps the discussion lively.

CONCLUSION

Questions and learning activities are crucial to effectively capturing the interest of your group and creatively communicating God's Word. Don't fall prey to the ol' content dump method. Your group won't learn, and you won't be very encouraged in the process either.

Leading a group discussion is both an art and a science. There are skills you can learn and master, but each group session and group is unique. Once you learn the skills and gain experience, you will find that you become wiser and more comfortable as a leader.

108

FOR THOUGHT / DISCUSSION

1 Writing good questions takes practice. Write two open questions which you might use to launch a lesson on:

- *Pride (Romans 12:3).*
- *Obedience to the Lord (John 14:23-24).*
- *Wholesome talk (Ephesians 4:29).*

Spend a few minutes familiarizing yourself with Philippians 2:1-11 in order to answer the following:

- 2 From this passage, write an observation question that would help your group "see" what is in the passage.*
- 3 Now, write an interpretation question that would help your group discover what a portion of this passage means.*
- 4 Help them discover the significance of this passage by asking a question*

related to “What does it matter?”

- 5 In the final step of helping your group explore the passage, write a question that would help uncover the big idea of this passage.
- 6 As you move into the response section, write a question that would help the group envision what it would look like to live out this passage.
- 7 Next, as you consider your own heart resistance to this passage, ask a question that would help uncover the group’s Fallen Condition: the heart sin beneath the surface sin.
- 8 Finally, ask a question that would point to Christ as the solution to our heart resistance.

How to Kill Self-Discovery

- Ask “Yes” or “No” questions. For example, “Is God’s love like human love?” (These are 100% guaranteed discussion killers.)
- Ask leading questions when you should be using open questions, like this: “We struggle in our Christian life because we don’t understand forgiveness, don’t you think?” (Consider silence the norm if you ask this question.)
- Ask two-part questions that have “and” or “but” in them. Compound questions can be confusing. For example, “What does Paul say here and do you agree and how can you apply this principle?” (Questions like this are destined for blank stares.)
- Immediately answer your own questions. The leader asks, “How are we filled by the Spirit?” and before the group can think about it he answers, “Of course, by faith.” (Group members aren’t really even necessary if the leader hogs all the answers.)
- Fear silence and immediately fill it with some comment or answer. (Try some duct tape or a pair of rolled up socks if you can’t help yourself from saying something.)
- Laugh or criticize a given answer. (This will do wonders for group participation and unity. Do it often enough and the last laugh will be on you.)
- Act like you know it all. (Your group members might not want to say much, fearing they’ll sound stupid before their omniscient, all-wise leader.)
- Ask only objective questions, such as “What does the word ‘believe’ mean?” (Some of the most powerful questions relate to feelings. For example, “How do you feel when you slam the car door on your hand?”)
- Ask questions regarding content only, and not application. (The goal is knowledge that leads to a changed life, not knowledge that leads to more knowledge. To get a little philosophical, Thomas Huxley once said, “The great end of life is not knowledge but action.”)
- Wing it. Don’t prepare questions ahead of time. Just go with the flow. (Good questions take time to prepare even if you are the King of Wing or Princess of Impromptu.)





THREE TYPES OF QUESTIONS

TYPE	EXAMPLE	USE
<p>OPEN</p> <p>Questions that allow group members to share any answer or relevant thoughts they may have on the subject or passage being studied.</p>	<p><i>“What truths stand out to you in this passage?”</i></p>	<p>Very valuable for group discussion. This kind of question stimulates thought and discussion, because there are no right or wrong answers.</p>
<p>CLOSED</p> <p>Questions that are obvious or imply the answer expected by the leader.</p>	<p><i>“Paul says we are to rejoice in everything, doesn’t he?”</i></p>	<p>Questions like this are not valuable for discussion and actually stifle group interaction.</p>
<p>LIMITING</p> <p>Questions which limit the number of “correct” answers to a particular question.</p>	<p><i>“What three motivations does Paul mention in this passage?”</i></p>	<p>These questions aren’t very valuable for open discussion, but they are necessary for helping to explore what the passage says and what it means..</p>

SIX TYPES OF QUESTIONS

TYPE	EXAMPLE	USE
LAUNCHING	<i>“What’s the most generous thing that someone has ever done for you?”</i>	To cultivate interest in the study by raising an issue that your passage addresses.
EXPLORING: OBSERVATION	<i>“In Ephesians 2:1-10, what kind of tone was Paul using to communicate?”</i>	Questions that help answer, “What does it say?” to help the group discover what the author wanted to communicate to his readers.
EXPLORING: INTERPRETATION	<i>“In Ephesians 2:1, what does it mean to be dead?”</i>	Questions that help answer, “What does it mean?” in order to understand the original meaning of the passage.
EXPLORING: SIGNIFICANCE	<i>“In light of Ephesians 2:4-10, why is it important to know that you are now and forever an object of God’s love?”</i>	Explores the question, “What does it matter?” to help the group see the significance of this passage in their life.
EXPLORING: SUMMARY	<i>“In Ephesians 2:1-10, what is it that Paul really wanted his readers to understand about the God’s love?”</i>	Asks questions that help group members discover the big idea of the passage.
RESPONSE	<i>“Twice in Ephesians 2:5-10, Paul emphasized that salvation is by grace and not by works. In what ways do you find yourself still trying to perform for God?”</i>	Asks heart-level questions that expose our Fallen Condition and point to Christ as the solution.