
Don't ask me that!

How not to write Bible study questions

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In English, Bible study group leaders are exceptionally privileged. There are hundreds of pre-prepared study guides, with suggested questions to ask on a multitude of Bible passages and themes. It is likely that a new Bible study group leader will rely heavily on these pre-prepared questions before they have the confidence to plan a study from scratch. It is also likely that he or she will have participated in a significant number of studies before being asked to lead.

But what about those languages where there are no such pre-prepared study guides? It often becomes the duty of local church leaders to learn to write them. But preparing good questions is far from easy, especially when you're new to it. It's harder still when you and your church have had limited experience in running participatory Bible study groups and where the main method of teaching has been the Sunday morning sermon. Preparing a message to preach and preparing a Bible study to lead begin in the same place (reading and understanding the text) but they take very different routes from there.

Asking good questions

A popular topic in local-language Scripture Engagement workshops is "How to prepare and lead a Bible study". In such sessions, we usually highlight the sorts of questions you should ask, like:

- ***Observation questions*** – questions on the content of the passage (*who, what, when, how?*);
- ***Interpretation questions*** – questions aimed at understanding the meaning of certain words, phrases, events and actions (*why? what does that mean?*);
- ***Application questions*** – questions about what God is saying to us today through his Word, and especially what we should do about it (*so what? what now?*)

For example, let us take the story of Zacchaeus:

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner'." ⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." (NIV)

We could prepare a Bible study with the following questions:

1. What kind of person was Zacchaeus? (vs.2)
2. What did Zacchaeus do in order to see Jesus? Why? (vs.3-4)
3. When Jesus saw Zacchaeus, what did he ask him? (v.5)
4. Why did the people mutter when they saw Jesus go and stay in Zacchaeus' home? (v.7)
5. What did Zacchaeus do that proved he really wanted to repent? (v.6, 8)
6. How did Jesus respond to Zacchaeus' change of heart? (v.9-10)
7. What did Jesus mean in saying Zacchaeus was "a son of Abraham"? (cf. Gal. 3:7)
8. Zacchaeus' changed life was evident to all, especially in his generosity to others. What changes do people see in us? How can the way we use our money and possessions show that Jesus has saved us and changed our lives?
9. Jesus said he had come "to seek and to save the lost" (v.10). Are there members of our community we think are beyond God's salvation? Think of those you know who are still spiritually lost. How could we help them to meet Jesus?

Questions 1 to 6 are observation questions. Question 7 is an interpretation question and questions 8-9 are application questions.

Asking unhelpful questions

As well as teaching the sorts of questions you should ask, it can also be helpful to highlight the sorts of questions you shouldn't ask, i.e. what kinds of questions or series of questions can be unhelpful or uninteresting? What kinds of questions should I probably avoid if I want to encourage a good Bible study?

Let us consider a few of them.

1. Yes/no questions without any other follow-up questions

These are questions which call for a simple answer “yes” or “no”, such as:

Was Zacchaeus a rich man? (v.2)

Did Zacchaeus agree to welcome Jesus into his house? (v.6)

Were the people happy to see Jesus go and stay with Zacchaeus? (v.7)

Did Zacchaeus repent? (v.8)

Such questions are generally unhelpful because people can guess the answer without needing to look at the Bible, they are generally too easy and they do not encourage much in the way of group participation.

If you do want to ask a yes/no question, it is best to follow it immediately by another question, e.g.:

Were the people happy to see Jesus go and stay with Zacchaeus? Why not?

Did Zacchaeus repent? What did he decide to do that showed that?

2. Too many questions with short answers

Such as:

What town was Jesus in? (v.1)

What was Zacchaeus’ work? (v.2)

What size of person was he? (v.3)

What did Zacchaeus climb to see Jesus? (v.4)

There is no problem with the occasional short answer question, but if most of your questions are of this kind, it will reduce group interaction and could make your study sound like a Bible knowledge quiz.

These might be the sorts of questions you would want to ask a children’s Sunday school class to test how well they’ve been listening. But don’t forget that children too need to be encouraged to interact with the message of Scripture. We are not only interested in them filling their heads with Bible facts. We want them to be drawn into the Bible story, to think, reflect, and prayerfully consider what God is saying to them.

3. Questions that are repetitive or uninteresting

Such questions might look like the following:

- i. What did Jesus say to Zacchaeus?
- ii. What did the people say about Jesus?
- iii. What did Zacchaeus say to Jesus?
- iv. What did Jesus say to Zacchaeus after that?

Or

- i. What did Jesus do in v.1?
- ii. What did Jesus do next in v.5?
- iii. What did Jesus do after that in v.7?
- iv. What did Jesus say next? (v.9)

One or two of these types of questions would probably be fine, but when the same type of question is repeated several times it reveals a lack of creativity. This could be boring or off-putting to the group members, unless the group leader is particularly animated.

4. Questions which emphasise the minor details of a passage

All of God's Word is important, and God can and does speak through all of it, even those parts we consider to be the minor details. But saying that, if we want to pick 6 to 10 questions to ask on a passage, we would be wise to ensure that these questions focus on the key events and teaching. We do not want to "waste" questions on focussing attention on the smaller details, for example:

- (Luke 19:4) What kind of tree did Zacchaeus climb?
- (Mark 4:38) What was Jesus sleeping on?
- (John 4:8) What had Jesus' disciples gone into town to do?

5. Questions that are too difficult for the level of understanding of the group

A good Bible study has in mind the kinds of people who will be members of the group. Depending on the participants, it might be best to avoid questions that assume too much

knowledge of the culture in Bible times, too much theological understanding or extensive familiarity with cross-references and related Bible texts. For example:

Why did Jesus refer to himself as the “Son of Man”?
What is the Christological significance of Jesus’ words here?
What does this passage show us of the spiritual dimension of the Kingdom of God?

One of the aims of a Bible study is to help participants grow in confidence in their ability to read, understand and apply God’s Word. It might well be that the group leader will take the opportunity to give them some teaching on Bible background and context - but if possible he needs to avoid giving the impression to the group members that without a lot of theological expertise they cannot access the truths of Scripture.

6. Questions that are too easy for the level of understanding of the group

Discerning what is too easy for a group will depend on their age, background, experience and current understanding of the Bible. It will also depend on their culture, so that questions that would appear perfectly normal to ask in one culture might appear rather patronising or too simple in another culture.

In one sense observation questions are easy because all that the group participants have to do is to look at the text and the answer is right there before them. But such content questions are important because they ensure everyone has heard what the Bible is saying. Just because you have read through the passage at the start of the study does not mean everyone was concentrating on what was being said. Some people would have been struggling just to pronounce the words correctly, others anticipating their turn to read and others will have been day-dreaming. Observation questions are a way of reinforcing the content of the Bible verses in the minds of the group members, but care must be taken to ask them in an interesting way that does not appear too easy.

7. Questions that attempt to cover the whole of a passage, but most are concentrated in the first few verses

This is the kind of situation that arises when you know you want to ask a certain number of questions on a passage but do not space them out well enough. For example, you want to ask 8 questions, but you use up 5-6 of your questions in the first few verses when you still have 20 verses of the passage left to cover.

8. Questions that deviate significantly from the main point of the passage

For example:

This story of Zacchaeus talks about the giving of money and possessions. What does the Bible teach about how we should give our tithes to the church?

Let's look at some other passages which talk about tithes and offerings...

A leader of a Bible study group is like a captain of a ship. It is their responsibility to steer the participants in the right direction by asking good questions.

The group will need to decide to what extent they will allow the ship to be driven off course and be taken in quite another direction by questions from participants. Some groups prefer to be fairly strict about keeping to the text and avoid being side-tracked. Other groups are more relaxed and are quite happy to begin a study on one Bible text, and then turn their attention to other passages, not quite sure of where it will lead them.

The most straightforward of these options is the one that seeks to stick to the passage as much as possible. It would be wise for the group leader not to begin the study with the intention of taking the ship off course. It is less confusing to those whose Bible knowledge is not encyclopaedic and it encourages the reading of Bible verses in their context.

9. Questions that demonstrate an incorrect understanding of the meaning of the text

For example:

How does this passage show us that generous giving earns us salvation from God?

It is important not to underestimate the value of a good Biblical understanding in the preparation of a Bible study. It is not something you should attempt to put together in a few minutes. Where possible, study questions should be checked by someone with some experience in Biblical exegesis.

10. Questions that suggest a misleading application, different from what the Biblical author would have intended

This is related to the previous point, since wrong interpretation can lead to misleading application. For example:

What do we learn in verse 8 about the percentage of our possessions we should give to the poor?

If we have cheated anybody, how much should we repay them?

Here we have a misunderstanding. The details of Zacchaeus' generosity and restitution of wrongs committed are not intended to be *prescriptive*, i.e. they do not give us a command to observe. Instead, they are *descriptive*, telling us what happened with one particular person in one specific situation. They do, however, show us that true repentance is a serious and costly business and that our actions will reflect the state of our changed heart towards God.

We meet similar application challenges in Old Testament narratives. Not everything in the lives of the heroes of the Faith (Abraham, Moses, David, etc.) is written to be an example for us to follow today.

Another tricky area in terms of application is when studying the healing miracles of Jesus. After seeing how Jesus healed the blind, lame and demon-possessed, it is tempting to ask something like:

What do we learn from these verses as to how to receive healing from Jesus today?

Although many do receive the Lord's healing, it is important not to ask a question in a way that implies that the passage is saying that Jesus promises instant healing to everyone. Such passages should be used to teach us more of who Jesus is - his power and authority, love and compassion, and his victory over evil, calling us to put all our hope and trust in him, even in the midst of suffering.

11. Questions that jump around from one verse to another, without a clear progression towards the application

In general, studies should begin with observation questions and end with at least one application question. Group members will find it easier to follow if you respect the order of the verses, rather than jumping back and forth.

One type of question to avoid is an anti-climax question at the end, i.e. instead of leaving the group members with the taste of challenge, application and worship in their hearts, you finish with a rather dry and technical question which seems to break the flow of the study.

Instead of diving straight into the text with the first question, some Bible study groups prefer to begin with a discussion question, a kind of ice-breaker to warm up the group and to set the context for the Bible reading and study to follow. In this case it is good if the initial discussion is strongly connected to the Bible text you will read and if the final application links back to the theme of the initial discussion. For example:

What are the kinds of things that worry us today? The kinds of things we get anxious about, that go round and round our heads? Shout out some ideas – we'll make a list of them.

Now read Luke 12:22-34 ("Do not worry...")

[Several questions on the text...]

Finally:

Let's go back to the list we made at the start. How does what we've learned today help us with these worries?

12. Application questions too soon before participants have had the chance to really look at the text and understand it

We want the application to flow from a good understanding of God's Word, understood in its context. Rushing into asking application questions too soon might put the emphasis on people's existing knowledge or experience rather than encouraging them to interact with the Scriptures before them.

A Bible study leader needs to remember that although he or she has spent time reading and reflecting on the text, most of the group members will not have done, so they need time to grasp what the text is saying first before they can ask "what is God saying to me through this text?"

13. Application questions that are too vague

The most general application questions are:

What can we learn from this passage?

What is God saying to us today from what we have looked at together?

These questions are not necessarily bad since they give freedom to the group members to share whatever they believe the Lord is saying to them. However, such questions should not be used if they are simply an excuse for the group leader not to spend much time reflecting on questions of application before the study. Application should not become an afterthought.

Often it is more helpful to give the group a prod in the right direction with application questions that probe and challenge, e.g.:

In what ways can we show love to our fellow believers?

What does this passage teach us when we are suffering persecution?

How can we live our lives in a way that will be a good example for those who are younger in the faith?

How can what we've looked at today strengthen our confidence in God?

14. Application questions that are too personal

Some questions of application are best left to the individual to think about personally, on their own, rather than to share in the group:

How much money does each of us give to the poor? Let's go round the group and each person can say how much money and possessions they have given away in the past year.

In what situations over the past week have you been tempted by lustful thoughts?

It might be unwise to ask people to confess to serious marriage problems, sins of immorality, lust, etc. before the group.

15. Application questions that have little relevance to the lives of the group members

Such questions can come as a result of translating Bible studies intended for other cultures. So, for example, if a Kenyan village pastor seeks to translate a Bible study intended for an urban American church, he might find that there are some questions of application that are far from useful for his own congregation.

When we prepare a Bible study, we need to meditate prayerfully on the Scriptures to find the areas of application which speak most clearly into the lives of the group members. These will differ according to culture, context, age group, maturity and religious background.

Conclusion

Choosing good questions and avoiding unhelpful and uninteresting questions is a step in the right direction to having a good Bible study, but it is not enough. You'll also need a capable and motivated leader who is well trained and prepared, as well as participants who are hungry to read, understand and apply God's Word to their lives. And above all, we need God himself to bring light to his Word, to speak to our hearts and minds, challenging, convicting and encouraging us. Essentially, what we are looking for in a Bible study is an opportunity for group members to engage with the Scriptures, encountering the Living God through his living and active Word.

This document is available for download at: <http://www.scripture-engagement.org>

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