

The Skillful Use of  
Questions In Teaching Adults  
by Josh Hunt

This is an excerpt from Disciplemaking Teachers, (Group, Jan. 1998)

I need your help!

---

I am not absolutely convinced that asking questions is the only way to accomplish the four things that must happen in the student for disciplemaking to take place. Lectures and creative methods have their place and can contribute. But, the truth is, leading discussions is by far and away my favorite way to teach. I rarely speak more than a paragraph without involving the group with a question. I really feel it is the best way. I am so committed to asking questions as a way of teaching I write 25 or so questions on the passage most of our groups are studying each week. I have about half the Bible completed and hope to publish them some day. There are a number of similar resources already on the market, such as the Serendipity Bible. Let me mention two or three kinds of questions I use. Here is the overview:

- The Life Exposure Question
- What Does the Text Say?
- "How Did They Feel?" Questions
- "Jump Ball" Questions
- Application Questions
- Accountability Questions
- Testimony Questions: How Has It Worked So Far?

#### The Life Exposure Question

I like to begin almost every class I teach with a kind of off-the-wall question that just gets everyone mentally checked in, and allows the group to get to know something about each other besides their view on various Bible subjects. Some people think this is a waste of time, but I think it is important. I am careful, however not to spend too much time on it.

I often do this by having everyone introduce themselves and share some silly thing, like. . .

- Their favorite restaurant.
- Their favorite recent movie.
- Their favorite TV show.

One outdoor (or indoor, or spectator or participative or summer or winter) sport they enjoy.

- Their favorite way to spend a Saturday.
- If they could live anywhere in the world, where would they choose?

Here is my favorite one:

- If you had one life to waste, to absolutely blow on something totally outrageous, what would you waste it on?

I have heard answers ranging from sky diving to traveling to overdosing on drugs. It opens the window a bit into each person's life. Here is the key thing: it gets everyone talking right up front. It is hard to talk and not be paying attention. Getting everyone saying something once early in the session will make it

easier for everyone to talk when we get to talking about things that matter. It also allows people to identify people in the group with whom they have some common interest. Part of what we are about in small group work is cultivating relationships.

Sometimes I use more serious questions that in some way relate to the text. If I am teaching on the fatherhood of God I might ask them to share their name and, on a scale of one to ten, rate your relationship with your father growing up. Or, if I am teaching on wisdom and guidance, I might ask them to share one time they felt God helped them with a decision. I try to be meaningful, but not so personal as to embarrass anyone. I once asked a singles group to share their name and how old they were when they first kissed someone other than family. One girl shared she had never been kissed. Ouch. Don't ever ask questions like that. Repent!

This first question may or may not have all that much to do with the text. It just gets everyone mentally checked in and exposes the group to each other in a friendly way. The next question begins the exposure to truth.

### What Does the Text Say?

My daddy used to say, "You gotta know what the Bible says before you can know what it means." We often want to skip this. Maybe because we are so familiar with the text we assume everyone is. Maybe we just don't want to take the time.

It is safer to assume that many are fuzzy on at least the details of the text and need to be reminded. Many people don't read well. Many more don't read at all. We serve them by getting them thoroughly acquainted with what the text says. If we are doing our outreach well we will have a number of people who do not know the Bible well. It is a shame for a teacher not to have a number of spiritual babies or lost people in their class. Sometimes you hear comments that make you think teachers are proud of how well the whole group knows the Bible and grasps deep spiritual truths. It just means they are lousy at outreach. Healthy groups have spiritual babies in them.

"What the text says" questions are good questions to draw out quiet, shy, or introverted people. Just get them used to opening their mouth in front of this group. I might call on a quiet person to look at a specific verse and tell me one bit of information from that verse. You can bet they will pay attention. Here are some examples, along with the verses so you can really see how they work.

Jerry, who was the demon possessed man commanded to tell?

Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." (Mark 5:19)

Follow up question: what is the application? (This is asked to the whole group.)

John, how does Paul describe what God has done to us in verse 21?

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (II Corinthians 5:21)

Follow up question: how does it feel to you to say, "God has made me to be the righteousness of God?" (From there I might ask questions like:

Why does it feel awkward?

Is it true, or is this just hyperbole or God talk?

What difference would it make if we came to accept this on face value?

If I am the righteousness of God, why do I so often feel like a crumb?

If I am God's righteousness, why do I sin so much?

How could we come to take ownership of this truth so that our feelings about ourselves were not so far from what the Bible says?

I might also throw in a short talk on how identity produces behavior.

Sarah, what is the job description of pastors and teachers in verses 11 and 12, and by implication, what is the job description of everyone else? (This more complex question I would only ask to someone I knew could handle it.)

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. (Ephesians 4:11, 12)

Follow up questions: What do you think these works of service include? What are some examples? What works of service have we been equipped for and done in the last three weeks?

"How Did They Feel?" Questions

In narrative material I have found it very helpful to look beyond the text and what happened to the emotions they felt as the events took place. Here are some examples:

Story Question

Prodigal son.

How did the son feel as he approached the father near the end of the story?

How did the father feel?

What was the elder brother feeling?

Abraham offering Isaac.

What was Abraham thinking as he got up early in the morning to take Isaac to be sacrificed? What was he feeling?

How do you think he felt when he saw the ram?

Nathan confronts David.

As he was preparing to talk to David, what was going through Nathan's head? How did he feel as he stepped to the door?

How do you think David felt when Nathan said those dramatic words, "You are the man."?

Paul's conflict with Barnabas over John Mark?

Why did Barnabas feel so strongly about keeping John Mark on the team?

What were Paul's feelings on the matter?

What do you think John Mark felt?

Was this a polite disagreement, or were they really angry? Do you think they raised their voices?

When you ask emotion questions you are not just looking for one answer. Many times we have mixed feelings--that is, we are feeling a variety of things. You might have several in mind and if the group does not name an emotion you might just ask, "Do you think David felt defensive or convicted?" (Maybe both, which makes it a good jump ball question, which we will talk about next.)

So far we have looked at three types of question, can you remember what they are?

- The \_\_\_\_\_ Question
- What Does the \_\_\_\_\_ Say?
- "How Did They \_\_\_\_\_?" Questions
- "Jump Ball" Questions
- Application Questions
- Accountability Questions
- Testimony Questions: How Has It Worked So Far?

### Jump Ball Questions

When I get into the heart of the lesson, I like to have a good jump ball question. A jump ball question is a question that can legitimately go either way. If I write the question well there will be some who will answer the question one way, while others take the opposite viewpoint. If I do this successfully, I just sit back and let them wrestle it out for a while.

What I am trying to create is a discussion where I am a player, even the most important player, but just a player still. This is very different than many questions that are just a dialogue between the teacher and one student at a time. I am trying to get the students to interact with each other.

Here is an example of a good jump ball questions I have used. If you teach a group, you might want to use this one the next time you are together and see where it goes.

Is Christianity easy or hard?

As far as I am concerned, this question can be answered either way, depending on what you mean. Experience will teach most people to naturally react that it is difficult, and there are verses that point in this direction. But, Jesus said, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:30). In my opinion, Christianity is either easy or impossible. It is like good dancing. It requires discipline and practice. But if you are struggling with it, you are probably losing. It ought to look easy. There ought to be a grace and a poise and a joy in it that makes it easy. This is why the Puritans taught us that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Christianity is at its best when we enjoy it. Yet, it demands everything. We must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. We must give up everything to be his disciple. So, in a way it is easy and in a way it is hard. That is why this is a good jump ball question.

Sometimes, the trajectory of a jump ball has to be altered slightly, either because you miscalculated the release, or because of the mind set of the group. For example, with the above example, you might have a group that will land completely one way or the other. If this happens, you take the other side.

Suppose they all say, "Christianity is hard." Ask: "What about the verse that says, 'My yoke is easy.' What is the answer according to that verse?" If they all say it is easy, I ask, "Is it always easy for you?"

Sometimes I alter the trajectory just to push the discussion a little farther, or in a new direction. Here is an example of a question I used in two groups, and got completely different reactions. I had to alter the trajectory of the jump ball question in order to create the discussion. In order to launch the jump ball, I had to tell a story:

I was talking to a guy the other day and at a certain point in the conversation I said to him, "You are saying to me that a sinner comes to God and says, 'please help me quit sinning' and God might say to him, 'no'." "That is exactly what I am saying," he replied. Reflect on that for me? Is that true? How could it possibly be true?

After they discussed for a while, I altered the trajectory: "What about with reference to knowing God-- could it ever be that someone would come to God and ask to know Him and God would say, "no"?"

The point of the first question was to impress the students with the idea that it is possible to come to God and ask him for help in dealing with sin and your motives be all wrong. It may be you have no real interest in God, it is only that sin has become inconvenient. It has messed up your life and you simply want a better life for you. Maybe you have some habit or addiction that has gotten out of control and you want God to do what Weight Watchers or AA could not do. In this case you may not really be interested in God of the kingdom. God becomes a Jeanne, another self-help method. I have turned to tapes and books and they didn't work; I want a better life so I turn to God. God may say, "no".

In a similar way, it is possible to come to God asking him to know him, and the motive be all wrong. Jesus said to Peter, "Peter, do you love me more than these?" (I think he was speaking of the nets, not the other disciples in John 20.) I think that is not just a question for Peter, but for everyman. Jesus points to the various attractions in our life and says, "Do you love me more than these?" It is possible to want to know God because we think that is part of the good life as we define it. The question about Job is also every man's question, "Will Job serve God for nothing?" Will you? Will I? Or do we want to know him for what we will get out of it. There comes a time in every believer's life when he does to us what he did to Abraham when he says, "Take your son, your only son whom you love. . . and sacrifice him."

This is an abbreviation of a 5 minute lecture I would give in class after the mind has been opened with the jump ball question.

### Application Questions

Application is the point. As Howard Hendricks says, "We are not out to make smarter sinners, but saints." Application is not something we tack on the end of a good discussion. It is the point of the discussion. In teaching at its best, all roads lead to application. Every question, story, verse, illustration, example, lecture--all of it leads to application.

Application questions are pretty straightforward:

How can we apply this to our lives?

What difference would it make on Monday morning if we knew God?

Specifically, how do we go about enjoying God?

What advice would you give to a friend who did not see himself as the righteousness of God, as II Corinthians 5:20 describes? (People are often better at giving advice to a friend than they are telling exactly how they would do something.)

What specific steps could we take to make this a reality in our day to day lives?

What is one thing you could do for your spouse this week that would demonstrate a servant's heart. Name something you were not already going to do anyway.

The key to good application questions is their specificity. Resist like the plague the temptation to be too grandiose. Talk about specific things they can do this week.

People forget most of what they hear. They even forget a lot of what they see and talk about (though the percentages go down). But we remember a lot of what we do. If you can get the group to do one small thing in application of the truth studied you greatly multiply the chances of them permanently altering their life.

The other side of the application issue is that there is a lot more to being a disciple than doing. There is being, feeling, knowing. If people come to understand that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, wise, immutable, transcendent, holy, loving, kind, etc, it will alter the way they think, feel and live. In fact, you could argue that it would not be possible to really be a maturing disciple without most of our concepts about God being accurate. These are not always easy to apply. The fact that I am thoroughly impressed by the fact that God is holy is important. Application can come later. I just need to understand something about God. We need to relax and not push for application where it is not appropriate. We also need to be aware and push for it every time we can.

Time to review. Let me hold you accountable for what you have learned. How many of the questions we have talked about so far. How many types of questions can you remember?

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- "\_\_\_\_\_ " Questions
- \_\_\_\_\_ Questions
- Accountability Questions
- Testimony Questions: How Has It Worked So Far?

#### Accountability Questions (top)

Open groups--that is, groups that people can walk in on anytime--have an inherent limitation with reference to accountability. In a closed group you can build some discipleship momentum so they know they will be held accountable every week for their quiet time or scripture memory or whatever. It is difficult to do this and be an inviting, including, evangelistic group. Both kinds of groups--accountability and evangelistic--can be used by God in the discipling process.

Still, there can be accountability in open groups. The accountability, however, needs to be short term. If I give an application this week about having the world on our heart and praying for a missionary of a country this week, I need to ask them about it the next. If I challenge the group to memorize one verse this week, I need to hold them accountable the next. People who are new to the group will not feel they have come in on the middle of something. They will realize this is an assignment just given last week, and if they come next week, they will be right up to speed.

Another kind of accountability has to do with beliefs. Say we teach a lesson on the idea that we are to enjoy God (Psalm 37:4; Philippians 3:1, 4:4). I might ask the next week, "Did anyone have any moments this week when you enjoyed God? Tell us about it" Or, more simply, if I teach a lesson on the fatherhood of God, I might ask the following week, "What did we say last week, is God more like a policeman, or a father? Have you had a chance to think about that the last week?"

In addition to accountability in class, the teacher should be pushing for personal accountability between members outside of class. This will be dealt with in more detail in a later section. (p. 134)

Are you up for another review?

- The \_\_\_\_\_ Question
- What Does the \_\_\_\_\_ Say?
- "How Did They \_\_\_\_\_?" Questions
- "\_\_\_\_\_ " Questions
- \_\_\_\_\_ Questions
- \_\_\_\_\_ Questions
- Testimony Questions: How Has It Worked So Far?

Testimony Questions: How Has It Worked So Far?

Most people are more persuaded by the group than they are the truth. That is why we facetiously ask our kids, "If all your friends jumped in the fire, would you?" The ironic thing we seldom think about is that the answer to that question is "yes" more often than we know. Think about Jonestown. I have a guy in our church that was among the first team of people to go to Guyana and investigate. He explained why the early estimates of the number of dead were so low (about 300 versus about 900). They knew about how many people lived in the commune, yet they did not see that many bodies. They assumed hundreds of them had run away. That is logical, because we think that is what we would do. We would run into the jungle if someone asks us to drink cyanide laced kool-aid. We forget the pull of the crowd. What they did not realize was that people took the cyanide and laid down on other dead bodies to die, so that the dead were stacked three and four and five deep. There is an incredible power in the influence of the group.

We often think of peer pressure as a teen issue. It is not. Peer pressure effects everyone. The role of the teacher is to capitalize on this fact in the disciplinmaking process.

This is why testimonies are so valuable. Consider this, in nearly all Sunday School classes there is a wide variety of maturity represented in the people present. Rather than just telling everyone, for example, that they ought to have a quiet time, why not allow three or four of the people to share their story?

What does it mean to them?

What specifically do they do?

Where do they sit, what time, what are the details?

How did they get started?

Why do they do it?

What are the rewards?

These testimonies will be far more valuable than your persuasion. People are persuaded by their friends. They do what they see their friends doing. In almost any area of application you can ask for testimonies of people who are doing it.

By the way, I have seen testimonies work the other way, and it is disastrous. Suppose a group was holding one another accountable for having a daily quiet time. The leader comes in and asks how the group did this week. One pipes up, "I didn't do so well. Not a single day." "Yeah, I didn't do any better." "Well, I read one day, but I didn't get too much out of it." This teacher is in deep weeds.

#### Review

What have we learned so far? See if you can recall the seven kinds of questions we can use to teach a group.