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BIBLE STUDY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

From: <https://blog.logos.com/2016/09/how-to-ask-excellent-bible-study-discussion-questions/>

Leading a group Bible study is deeply rewarding, but let's be honest: it's also a little terrifying. Once you begin a conversation, you give up a sense of control. You might travel from Exodus to the politics of Disney faster than you can say "talitha koumi." Your efforts might produce unbearable silence, heretical comments, or topical whiplash that spins the group dizzy.

For these reasons, many people avoid leading true discussions in their Bible study groups. ...But though it's unscripted, a Bible study can be directed. ...Though open-ended, it can have goals. ...Though interrogative, it can still be powerfully declarative.

Bible studies have a feature that few sermons or personal quiet times can match: interaction. Harnessing the power of interaction should be one of your highest priorities when leading a Bible study.

To do so, you must master four types of Bible study discussion questions.

1. Launching Questions

The first five minutes of your Bible study portend what's to come. If you hook your people early, they'll feel compelled to participate. But, like bad morning breath, boredom often shows up early—and it may sink your ship before you leave the dock.

The very first question of your Bible study should be open, engaging, and linked to the main point of the passage. It should promote interaction and foreshadow application. The goal of the launching question is not merely to capture attention; you could do that by swallowing a sword or wearing a hat made of spaghetti. The goal is to unleash the text and win people early to the main idea.

Tip: Avoid easing into the discussion by merely reviewing the previous passage or meandering toward a point. Use a strong discussion-starter to foster interaction. For example, you could begin a discussion about Moses' call to ministry—and his resistance to this call—in Exodus 3–4 with the question, "How do you normally respond to the weakness or suffering of other people?"

2. Observation Questions

Any decent Bible study, whether individual or group-based, should be rooted in careful observation of the text. You have no chance at faithful interpretation without first noticing what the Bible says. A skilled discussion leader must strike a delicate balance: she must guide the group through textual observation—without making the discussion feel inane or elementary.

Tip: Avoid fill-in-the-blank or read-my-mind questions that have only one correct answer. Use focused but open-ended questions to drive the group’s collective noses into the text and to foster interaction.

For example, when observing Acts 19:1-10, don’t ask, “What baptism did the Ephesian disciples receive?” Ask, “What experience of Christianity did the Ephesian disciples have before Paul arrived?” Don’t ask, “What was the first thing Paul did when he arrived in Ephesus?” Ask, “How does Paul interact with the Ephesian disciples?”

Here’s a handy list of generic, yet useful observation questions to use regularly:

- What words or ideas are repeated in the passage?
- Who are the main characters, and what are they doing?
- How does the narrator name these characters?
- What logical connector words move the argument forward?

Good observation questions simultaneously engage the group and open the door to interpretation.

3. Interpretation Questions

After drawing out your group’s observations, it’s time to dig in. What does the passage mean? Your personal study of the text is essential. Having prayerfully wrestled with the passage yourself, you should have a good sense of the flow and tension the author intended. You should be able to summarize the main point (or points) of the passage succinctly.

At this point, there’s one key trick for developing interpretation questions: work backwards. Plant your flag on the main point of the passage, review the trail you hiked to get there, and develop questions to guide your group to the summit. Which observations were most significant? Which questions directed you to the main point and which were tangential? How does the argument of the passage flow from beginning to end? Which highlights will best serve the group?

Tip: Avoid inflexible questions that hinder the group’s mutual discovery of the text. Use honest and curious questions that both take people toward the main point one step at a time and foster interaction.

For example, when studying Isaiah 25:1-5, you could ask, “Why will the strong and ruthless people glorify God?” Or, “Why does Isaiah 25:5 refer to ‘the song of the ruthless’?” Or, “Why do the verb tenses keep changing?”

Some good stock questions are:

- What does [observation] mean?
- Why does the author say that [or say it that way]?
- If that is true, what effect would it have had on the original audience?

4. Application Questions

Welcome to the most uncomfortable part of your Bible study! Regardless of how energetic the discussion has been, getting personal will be tough. Your group may float on the momentum of observation and interpretation like a shiny soap bubble on a breezy, spring day, yet that bubble can pop as soon as you transition to application.

Abstraction and intellectual distance won't protect you anymore. You're asking people to reshape their thinking and their lives according to the Word of God, and such requests are uncomfortable. But don't shy away from the discomfort! When you discuss the work of God to conform us to the image of Christ, any tension you feel is evidence of progress. Lead your group through the awkwardness, and your courage will be infectious.

Tip: Only ask questions you're willing to answer first. Avoid questions so general that nothing changes, and avoid questions so specific there's no room for the Holy Spirit to surprise. Combine general and specific questions to foster interaction—and answer them yourself first to give an example of vulnerability. For example, “How will this passage affect your willingness to take risks?” Or, “How can you live as though [the passage's main point] is true?” Or, “How can we remind one another of these things?” Bible studies don't have to be scary. Sure, you'll lose some control if you temporarily set aside your lectern to foster interaction. But a Bible study with well-prepared, thoughtful questions just might end up more thrilling than a 4x4 off-roading adventure.

ADDITIONAL PROBING QUESTIONS

- What are the **key words** for you in this passage? What are their possible meanings?
- What in this passage is **disturbing or unclear** for you?
- Whose **perspective** are we getting in this passage? Author, historical context, agenda?
- **How do we know what we know?** Is this a new passage for you? What do you know about?
- How to approach it? Literal, truth not fact, outside resources
- What are the **connections** that you see here? To your life, to other passages by same author to other passages in this same lectionary study? Why were they chosen together?
- **What if** this was written today? How would the images, metaphors, focus change?
- **So what** do we conclude? Writer's purpose, God's purpose, where do we go next? Is there a so what for us?
- **What have you learned** from this passage?
- What **additional questions** would you like to explore related to these passages?

CURRICULUM

Westminster Press and The Thoughtful Christian
Seasons of the Spirit
The Present Word
Feasting on the Word

There are also numerous works by well-known authors in the curriculum room, room 108 behind the library.

LECTIONARY WEBSITES

Note that *Lectio Divina*, textweek.com and Interlinear Bibles relate to all Bible study, not just lectionary passages each week.

TEXTWEEK.COM

Lectionary, Scripture Study, Worship Links, and Resources

Textweek.com contains a great number of resources, but these are the ones that Emily uses frequently.

Journey with Jesus

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/lectionary-essay-index>

A weekly essay on the Revised Common Lectionary

Left Behind and Loving It Blog

<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/>

This blog is a weekly translation of a text from the Revised Common Lectionary. It is my rough translation in **bold** with some initial comments in **blue**, all of which are subject to change as we journey together. This is really helpful in dealing with the Hebrew and Greek.

Vanderbilt Divinity School

<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>

Revised Common Lectionary Commentary covering each scripture

Working Preacher

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/>

Working Preacher has been a trusted source of inspiration, interpretation and imagination for preachers across the globe. According to Google Analytics, in the past 12 months the site has hosted 4.4 million visits from preachers in 208 countries and territories. We have enlisted hundreds of friends -- biblical scholars, theologians, homileticians and pastors dedicated to the craft of biblical preaching -- to provide you timely, compelling and trustworthy content. On the site you'll find material geared to the weekly lectionary.

Interlinear Bibles for Greek and Hebrew

Also from Emily, 'There are also two online interlinear Bibles that I find interesting. The transliteration (literal translation) is sometimes a clue to interpretation.'

http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/Greek_Index.htm

http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/Hebrew_Index.htm

LECTIO DIVINA

<https://ocarm.org/en/content/lectio/lectio-divina-3rd-sunday-ordinary-time-c>

This is a site by Carmelites that provides the following for at least one of the lectionary passages each Sunday. *Lectio Divina* has been likened to "feasting on the Word": first, the taking of a bite (*lectio*); then chewing on it (*meditatio*); savoring its essence (*oratio*) and, finally, "digesting" it and making it a part of the body (*contemplatio*).

These techniques would work well for any type of Bible study. There five parts to this approach.

- *Opening prayer*
- *Lectio*, the portion that focuses on text and comment
- *Meditato*, where there are questions, discussion of historical context, literary context for a detailed analysis of the text.
- *Reflect*
- *Contemplate*

REFERENCE BOOKS IN OUR RESOURCE CENTER

On the reference shelf several to consider are:

New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

The New Interpreters Bible

The Barclay Series

The Interpretation Series

Westminster Bible Companion

Parallel Synoptic Gospel

In addition, there are scores of volumes on individual books of the Bible. Check the notebook on the checkout shelf for books you want to research.

Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A, B & C

This series is available in the office outside of Emily's study.

Brueggemann, Walter, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome
Based on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, this series of three volumes provides resources for an entire year of sermons and offers practical help for preachers and others who use the Revised Common Lectionary. Beginning with Advent, this unique and comprehensive resource deals with lectionary texts. Each of the four texts – the Old Testament, Psalter, Gospel, and Epistle – for each Sunday and important festival day, including Christmas, Ash Wednesday, and Good Friday, is treated. A brief introduction for the day indicates the general thrust of the texts and the relationships among them, emphasizing the interpretation of the texts themselves. Also included are suggestions concerning the implications of the texts for life today.

SCHOLARS

Local: Peggy Cowan, Andrew Irvine, Bill Meyer, Drew Crain

Other Voices Worth a Listen:

Berry, Wendell (Novelist, Poet, Environmental Justice)

Borg, Marcus (New Testament)

Tutu, Desmond (Anglican)

Campolo, Tony (Social Justice)

Claiborne, Shane (Social Justice)

Johnson, Luke Timothy (NT, Former Priest)

Levertov, Denise (Poet)

Levine, A.J. (Jewish New Testament Scholar)

Lewis, C.S. (Christian Apologists)

L'Engle, Madeleine (Essayist and Novelist)

Long, Tom (New Testament)

McLaren, Brian (Postmodern Christianity)

Newell, J. Philip (Celtic Spirituality)

Oliver, Mary (Poet)

Palmer, Parker (Spirituality and Social Justice)

Pagels, Elaine (Early Christianity)

Robinson, Marilynne (Novelist)

Tickle, Phyllis (Religion and Spirituality)

Wallis, Jim (SJ) Founder of Sojourners

Williamson, Robert (Old Testament and Social Justice)

Wright, N.T. (Anglican/ New Testament)