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Leading A Small Group | GUIDING A DISCUSSION

What Do I Need to Know?

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 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

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meaning of the passage, these questions should be both limiting and open-ended and should focus on the following:

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

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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.

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