

ASKING ALL THE RIGHT QUESTIONS: LEADING EFFECTIVE DISCUSSIONS

- Kenneth Maresco -

I. **Determining Your Goals:** First, what is your goal in care group? The **Covenant Life Church Care Group Leaders Manual** describes the basic objectives of care group as “to consistently apply God’s word and develop relationships for the purpose of maturity, service, and outreach.” In other words, your discussions should be aimed at:

- A. Understanding God’s word. You can’t apply it if you don’t understand it.
- B. Applying God’s word to your lives, with the purpose of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29).
- C. Deepening relationships. Vulnerability and honesty are essential elements of this dimension of care group.
- D. Obedience, service, growth, and fruit. Godly activity as a result of understanding and applying God’s word.

With these as our goals how do we develop and utilize questions that will enable us to lead effective meetings?

II. **Begin with Prayer:** If you have selected materials and are beginning the process of preparing questions, begin with prayer.

- A. Ask the Holy Spirit for guidance. What are the issues that are most important right now for the people in your group? In this way you are preparing for people, not a meeting. This will help you keep your focus on the task. The purpose for our care groups is not simply good meetings. It is for the people to encounter God’s truth, and by the Holy Spirit’s work and grace, have it illuminated to them in their life situations. Ask God for guidance to serve people, to help them in their current circumstances.
- B. It is essential that you resist the pressure to “produce a good meeting” or preserve your reputation. Your preparation should be for the purpose of pleasing God and serving God’s people. God’s glory is your ultimate purpose.
- C. If you are overly concerned about how you will do or how the meeting will go, your

focus is on yourself rather than pleasing God. Repent and receive the grace necessary to prepare for the specific folks God has given you.

- D. Don't direct your prayers or your preparation to the problem people. Seek to build. Correct when necessary, but primarily *allow God's truth to break down wrong thinking, theology, or practice.*
- E. Don't just remember what Jesus said, but believe it, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." (John 15:4)

III. Atmosphere for Comfortable Discussions:

- A. Atmosphere where folks can be real. Create an environment where folks are free to ask questions. Leaders need to be accepting and unshockable. We are leaders to help folks grow. They can't grow if they can't be real. For God grants grace to the humble. And humility and reality are inseparable.
- B. Atmosphere of respect. Active listening: Listening attentively to others. Look at them, nod your head, pay attention. We must show respect to our care group members, not simply await the opportunity to ask the next question. Remember that a discussion involves people. Our respect and love demonstrated to the group will cultivate trust.
- C. An effective leader will draw questions from the responses of his group. Do they not understand an issue being discussed? Are they seeing it for the first time? Are they sensing conviction? How you respond to their responses will either facilitate the Spirit's work or hinder it. This is a very important aspect of leadership.
- D. Atmosphere that is not distracting. Make sure the room has:
 - 1. Adequate light, comfortable seating.
 - 2. The phone turned off.
 - 3. Distance from noisy children or other distractions.
 - 4. Is orderly, neat, and clean.

IV. Applying God's Word: The word of God must be the basis of all our ministry and the points we draw from books.

- A. Hermeneutics: The Science of Biblical Interpretation. The Scripture has a meaning

to the text that can be determined by following some basic rules of interpretation. See R.C. Sproul's, *Knowing Scripture*.

Rules of Interpretation: The purpose of hermeneutics is to protect us from misinterpreting the Scripture. We want to live by the Scripture, but to do that we must understand it. Three basic principles of interpretation:

1. The analogy of faith: or that Scripture should interpret itself. To state this in simple terms, no portion of Scripture should be interpreted in such a way that it conflicts with what the Scripture clearly teaches elsewhere.
2. Sensus Literalus: The Bible should be interpreted in its natural reading "according to the normal rules of grammar, speech, syntax, and context." A noun remains a noun and a verb a verb. Genre analysis is critical.
3. The Grammatico-Historical Method: This method of interpretation focuses on the grammatical construction and the historical context of the writing. What was the setting and context for the Scripture being written.

B. We must avoid subjectivism, "whatever you like is true for you, whatever I like is true for me."¹ This is not saying there is no element of the subjective in the truth, but the truth is not utterly subjective. As R.C. Sproul says, "We should seek to understand what the word says in its context before we go about the equally necessary task of applying it to ourselves."

C. Exegesis: To explain what the Scripture says. From the Greek "Ex", to guide out of.
Eisogesis: Reading into the text. It implies something that is not there.

D. Meaning vs. Application: We must distinguish between meaning and application. A Scripture may have one meaning but many applications. We must use long established principles of biblical interpretation to determine meaning.

V. A Key to Effective Discussion is Good Questions: You will usually be working with questions involving three situations or contexts:

A. Editing, arranging, and orchestrating existing questions (e.g. discussion questions listed at the end of a Bible Study).

¹ Sproul, R.C., *Knowing Scripture*, page. 38.

- B. Creating your own questions for a book, a chapter from a book, a portion of Scripture, or an article.
- C. A third and advanced component of leading effective discussions is learning to create questions in a discussion spontaneously.

VI. Developing Questions: What is the Author's Purpose? You will need to answer these questions whether you are choosing questions to use from prepared questions or preparing your own questions.

- A. Start with the question, "What is the author's purpose in writing?" Try to answer it in one to three sentences. Answering this question will help:
 - 1. In understanding the sub-points and illustrations used by the author.
 - 2. In determining what the issues are that you believe are important to lead your people through.
 - 3. In answering the questions that will result from the discussion.
 - 4. Maybe the most important point of determining the author's purpose is determining if it is relevant to your people in the first place. You want to choose wisely the books, articles, sections of Scripture you study as a group. Base your decision on the issues and topics you believe will help them grow in God's purposes in their lives. Do they need help in their marriages, with raising their children, in the arena of relating to a potential spouse (for singles)? Choose materials that teach the principles you agree with and will help you address these issues.
- B. An author's purpose can usually be found in the opening paragraphs as well the closing paragraphs of the author's article or chapter. What is the author's purpose or thesis for "Watch Your Language"? I submit it could be stated this way,

"Our speech reflects or reveals the quality of our Christian Life because how we speak reveals who we are and what we believe. Understanding this fact will help us to grow in the awareness of our sin, the magnitude of God's grace, and the knowledge of God's desire to set us free by both forgiving us and transforming us into his image."

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- C. How does the author accomplish his purpose? The second step is to determine how the author has organized his thoughts and developed his material. It is helpful to possibly sketch an outline on something like this (see addendum #4 for “Watch Your Language”).
- D. Seek to understand the author’s points in two contexts.
1. The context of his argument. Why is he making these points? What are the important points to his presentation?
 2. *Why are these points important to your people?* How do they fit into the big picture of their Christian lives?
- E. Very importantly, you must consider how much material you have to cover and how much time you have to cover it. A discussion allows for less material to be covered than a teaching. *If it is a long chapter or article you must prioritize. What are the critical points you want to get through? Build your questions around these points.*

Don’t get distracted by chasing theological rabbits, i.e. is a certain word obscene or simply an unbiblical world view. These questions may be interesting but they will not allow you to get anywhere specific, or build anything into your people.

1. Don’t take months and months to get through a book. There is no surer way to lose people’s interest and to diminish the effectiveness of your group.
2. Hit the main points of a chapter or a book. Do not try to cover it comprehensively.
3. This is the hardest part and most difficult part of leadership.

VII. Three Levels of Questions Are Helpful in Preparing Questions:

Once you have done the difficult work of understanding the author’s points, prioritizing them, and then thinking about what issues are the important ones you are ready to begin preparing questions. The following pattern for developing questions can be applied to help you with a variety of articles and passages.

Observation, Interpretation, Application. These are three basic categories that will help

you to organize around any material, they can be applied to any particular point. Each step requires increasing reflection and vulnerability from the group. This is not a formula that your questions should follow every time. The level of relationships in the group and the commitment of the folks will determine the group's level of vulnerability. The idea is growth, movement forward.

Observation: These are questions of fact. i.e. What is the author saying? What is his point on taking the tongue seriously? What other examples of evil speech besides foul language does the author give and what makes the speech evil?

What you are doing with these types of questions is asking folks what the author is saying. Questions like these encourage the participant to put the author's points into his own language. They enable him to begin the process of engaging the material on a deeper level. They also help you to know whether or not they have read the materials. These are basic interaction questions.

Interpretation: These are questions that require the participant to answer the question, "What do you think of the authors point here?" Some examples: "Do you agree that the battle for the tongue is a battle for the Christian life? Why do the euphemisms the world applies to sexual sin make sin less painful? Were major ideas presented? What are they and what is their significance?"

Interpretation questions can also bring in observation questions. "Have you ever personally seen this happen? Have you ever employed these types of euphemisms? Why?" You see, by asking them about their own experience, they are forced to begin to interpret the points through their own personal experiences.

Application leading to obedience: Here you get into the nitty gritty of what care group is all about. It is the place here we put into practice Jesus' words, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." (John 13:17)

Here are some sample application questions: "Why are we reading this material? "Why is this point important to us? What do we do with these questions so that we can grow in godliness and see God glorified and his grace magnified?"

Whatever our topic of study, we must keep in mind our end goal: to apply God's word to our lives, and to bring an increase in knowledge, grace, and godliness. Whether we are studying finances, justification, communication, marriage, sexuality - it all has the same purpose, which is *to help us be more and more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Ro. 8:28-29) to the glory of God.*

Here is an example of a question that is built on the earlier discussion that brings the group to a place of applying God's word to their lives:

(Start by highlighting the points we have observed) "We have learned that we tend to minimize responsibility for our behavior through the language."

(Then, if you can, use examples from the interpretation questions that have been shared) "(John) has shared how he has done this in the past, I'm sure we could all highlight similar experiences."

(Application) "What specific things can we do that will help us to take responsibility for our behavior?"

You have stated the author's purpose, interpreted it through your own experience and then lastly asked, "What can we do in response, to cooperate with God's purpose in conforming us into the image of Christ?"

Sample application questions:

- What do the truths taught in this article or passage mean to me here and now? (James 1:22-25).
- How does knowing this truth about God make a difference in your life? How can we apply this truth?
- What are the implications of this to you and me?
- Is there a command in this passage that we are required to obey?
- Is there an example to follow?
- What does this tell you about people in general? How does this apply to you and me? Now that we have learned these things what can we do to help us walk in obedience?

VIII. Good Questions Don't Guarantee Good Discussions.

- A. Own the questions. You must be enthusiastic about the material and its applications if you are going to lead the group into an enthusiastic response.
- B. Lead the discussion somewhere. When asking observation or interpretation questions, and even some application questions you want to allow members to share. However, you as leader should always lead and steer the discussion, avoiding tangents. You do this by following up on responses, particularly the ones that lead to the issues you see as most important:

1. Clarification: “could you restate what you said?”
2. Re-direction: If someone is going off on a tangent, bring it back, “Thanks for your thoughts on that, but I wonder if anyone else...(restate your question).”
3. Extension: “Could you expound on that? What do you think about what Paul said? Has anyone else ever felt conviction in this area? What did you do? How did you respond?”

IX. Leading a Group into Vulnerability:

- A. Recognize that the group will grow in vulnerability as they get to know one another and are led into the value of fellowship. Because of sin, most folks are comfortable with less than biblical fellowship. We must lead them into it.
- B. Questions that promote encouragement and getting to know one another often prepare a group for dealing with issues of indwelling sin. When folks are opening up their lives they like to know they are in the presence of faithful friends. I often think in terms of levels of questions:
 1. Getting to know one another.
 2. Honor one another.
 3. Foundation of grace.
 4. The business of indwelling sin.
- C. The leader should be the first one to answer questions demanding vulnerability. When asking questions that require confession of sins or weaknesses, the leader should set the tone. We should confess our shortcomings, failures, sins, and weaknesses, before expecting others to do so. We can do this by talking specifically about something others would not know about us unless we disclosed it to them. (Please always use discretion.)
- D. When vulnerability has been expressed, it is helpful to communicate an appropriate response. You are moving into deeper levels of fellowship and reality. You can:
 1. Ask others to share as well. This can be done by simply thanking the person for their vulnerability and asking others if they have experienced anything similar, or asking others if they wish to respond to the same question?

2. It is always wise to express support and love for those who are opening up their lives. As a minimum you should commit to praying for the person, and/or talking with them later.
3. Look for opportunities to minister. As the discussion brings forth biblical principles, it should lead the group to godly self reflection and application. Good discussion will lead to an experience of the Holy Spirit's presence.

X. Be Sensitive to the Holy Spirit:

- A. Have an objective in leading the discussion. Effective leadership begins with goals and focus. That is why you examine the author's intention at the beginning. However, as discussion proceeds, if you see certain issues affecting people emotionally, or if you are sensing conviction, joy, praise, or any other biblical response, follow the Holy Spirit. He may lead you to:
 1. A time of praise. If you are studying the work of God in regeneration it should leave you humbled, in awe, and ready to praise. Don't allow your care group to become an intellectual exercise.
 2. A time of ministry:
 - a. Leading folks through repentance.
 - b. Allowing the gifts of the spirit to operate as you pray over people.
 - c. If sin is confessed, is the person seeing it clearly? Is it appropriate to deal with the issue right now?
 - d. What do others think about the issue? Get others involved.
 - e. Are you offering biblical hope? The Cross leads to conviction and hope.
 - f. What are practical steps to follow up?
 3. A time of honoring folks for their humility of opening up, and commending them to God's grace which he promises to the humble.
 4. A time of prayer. Praying for revelation of the truths talked about, i.e. grace to change, grace for acceptance, the love of God, the fatherhood of God, the importance of relationships, further conviction of sin.
- B. Expect the Holy Spirit's help in leading a discussion. If you have prayed and

prepared, you have done all you can do. Remember that he loves God's people even more than you do. It is his job to touch and change hearts, not yours.

- C. Be looking for His direction. This is something we are not accustomed to doing. Ask for His help. Ask for discernment. Ask for wisdom. He wants to see his people established.