

The Art of Coaching



Learn to ask the 2 most basic life questions¹

- 1) **What are you facing?** First, what is this person facing in life?
- 2) **How does the Lord connect?** Second, what does the Lord say that speaks directly into what they are facing?

Learn to ask the 6 most basic coaching questions²

- 1) **How are you doing?** Beginning with this question sets a tone of relationship and care, rather than simply getting down to business. The answer to this question also helps you to know what tenor to take in the conversation. If someone is discouraged, then you can focus on encouraging them in the gospel. If someone is neutral, use it as an opportunity to inspire them. If someone is really doing well, then use the conversation to challenge them provide some new direction.
- 2) **What are you celebrating?** Listening to the answer to this question helps you understand two things. First, it helps you identify and encourage the leader in what things are currently going well. Secondly, what people celebrate tends to indicate what they value. If an individual consistently talks through the excellency of relationships within the group, but rarely celebrates outsiders participating in community, they likely value intimate relationships above mission.
- 3) **What challenges are you facing?** This question also gives two perspectives on the individual and the group. First, where sinners gather, there are always challenges. If there isn't a response to this, or they are consistently shallow challenges, it is likely the group isn't pursuing the vision for community groups and discipleship groups particularly well. Second, this question is also indicative to where there are misplaced values within the community. If "dealing with children" is consistently a challenge, it's likely that there is an overemphasis on the meeting and a lack of valuing demonstration of a missional community to children.
- 4) **What are you doing about those challenges?** This question is vital because you first want the leader to address the challenges on their own and present creative solutions before the coach chimes in. Ownership in leadership is expressed through problem solving—resist the temptation to solve problems for a leader!
- 5) **How can I help you?** This questions helps you respond in a constructive way and meet any needs of the leader or the community. It is also an opportunity to listen for both the strengths and weaknesses of the leader. If they are consistently requesting articles or books, it's likely they are a learner and predominantly lead through teaching, for example.
- 6) **How can I pray for you?** Finally, you can care best for a leader by committing to and following up with prayer. (It's especially important to do right on the spot.) Additionally, this question helps identify particular areas of concern that the leader has which may not be skill-based issues. Often here is where a leader will reveal a deep issue that is plaguing their community or express concern for an issue that needs to be addressed by an elder or pastor. This conversation pattern will be tremendously helpful for us in coaching community group leaders, leading ministry teams, and in many circumstances where we're just getting to know someone. It isn't foolproof, but it's a really helpful template to follow!

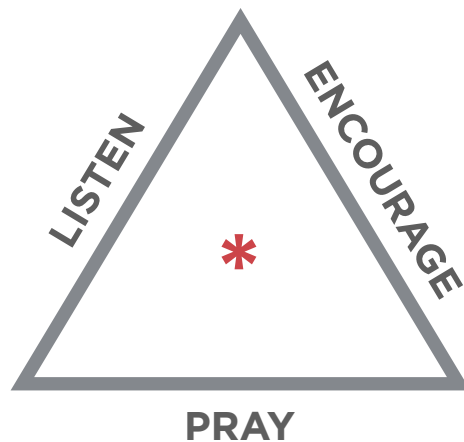
¹ These questions are drawn from an article by David Powlison entitled "What Questions Does a Biblical Counselor Suggest We Ask?" which is attached to this packet.

² This is a conversation template (originally created by Todd Engstrom of our sister church *The Austin Stone Community Church*) that we have found to be helpful for coaching leaders.



*I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity,
but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.*

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.



* If you remember nothing else as you walk alongside leaders, remember this. If you are careful to listen to them deeply, encourage them meaningfully, and pray for them diligently, you'll be fulfilling the heart of coaching.



Follow the 10 principles of fruitful coaching

- 1) **In every interaction, make it your aim to: (1) listen, (2) encourage, and (3) pray.**
- 2) **Treat them holistically**, by addressing not only (1) their ministerial needs, but also (2) their physical needs, and (3) their spiritual needs. We want to use ministry to get people done, rather than using people to get ministry done.
- 3) **In every interaction, aim for the heart—move the conversation one step deeper.**
- 4) **Call them to obedience to Jesus.**
- 5) **Call them to joy in Jesus.**
- 6) **Uniquely equip them, in their individuality, to do the work of the ministry.** Do they know what their spiritual gifts are? Do you? Are they fanning them into flame? Are you helping them to that end?
- 7) **Take what you know and prayerfully process it.** Take notes, and prayerfully review them before subsequent meetings. Tell yourself, “Let me make sure I know this person first.” Then ask, “What is one thing (as opposed to ten action steps) that this person should get hold of?”
- 8) **Be a subversive and move beyond the leader’s felt needs.** Love consumers, but confront consumerism, and expect change. We want to disciple the people of God to own the mission of God.
- 9) **Regularly consider your own heart and life story.**
- 10) **Notice small steps, and recommend and agree on small steps.** And then follow up.



Regularly stop and evaluate the health of the relationship

It is important to regularly stop and take stock of your relationship with each leader for whom you are providing coaching and care. Ask yourself:

- Does your relationship with each leader increasingly feel like a friendship? Are you enjoying each other? Are you growing in your ability to trust each other?
- Would you feel comfortable if you had to say something hard to them?
- Are the phone calls or face-to-face meetings intentional, and building on previous conversations? Are they moving beyond merely a “check-in,” and starting to sound like discipleship? Are you regularly praying together on the spot?
- Are you starting to get a feel for where they need to grow spiritually, and how you will walk alongside them in that process?
- Are you increasingly personal? Do you feel an increasing godly love for each leader? Do you feel increasing care and affection for them as individual people made in the image of God? Are you affected and moved by their sins and sorrows? Do you sense yourself increasingly caring *about* them even as you care *for* them?



The 10 principles for fruitful coaching, unpacked

This is an attempt to assemble a list of intangibles that are often, but not always, found in coaching that bears fruit. Many of you have probably noticed that we can be faithful in discipling or coaching a fellow believer—consistently meeting with them and dutifully inquiring about them—but still not see in them the kind of spiritual growth which we would hope to see over time. It is possible for our coaching to be faithful, but not necessarily fruitful. Sometimes this is simply because the person with whom we are walking alongside is unwilling to do the things necessary to grow. Sometimes they actually don't want to grow. Sometimes God in his mysterious purposes does not see fit to answer our prayers or theirs in regards to the pace at which we'd like to see them progress, or the amount of ground we'd like to see them cover. All Christians go through seasons where their progress in sanctification feels more like crawling than walking or running. But sometimes (certainly not always) faithfulness without fruitfulness can be due to our neglect of one or several of these coaching intangibles—things that can make a big difference, but that are often subtle, and possibly not named or noticed either when absent or even when present. In other words, sometimes we're coaching in ways that bear fruit, but we're doing it intuitively and wouldn't necessarily be able to put into words what we're doing in such a way that other aspiring coaches could learn from or imitate us. Here is an attempt towards that end.

- We must diligently add three ingredients to as many interactions with our leaders as possible. They are: (1) **listening**, (2) **encouragement** and affirmation, and (3) **prayer**. Most of us talk too much and listen too little. We end up being light on compassion and quick to give advice. It's been well said that the same verse of Scripture which falls flat when shared at minute five, if shared at minute *fifty-five*, can turn the lights on in a leader's heart. Further, Ed Welch reminds us to constantly ask ourselves if we're mingling our coaching with words of encouragement and affirmation. Lastly, when we merely talk about or refer to prayer, instead of stopping to pray for a leader on the spot, we empty much of the power out of our coaching conversations. Even when we do remember to pray, there can be a perfunctory, transactional quality to our prayer, where we subtly reduce prayer to a way of "landing the plane" by wrapping up the meeting on a spiritual high note. But when our prayer emerges from listening to the other person, while simultaneously listening to God, and when our prayers are energized by compassion, prompted by the Spirit, and infused with Scripture, they will become an increasingly powerful means of ministering to the needs of our leaders. *Take a moment and rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, how consistently and skillfully you practice each of these three rhythms in your coaching conversations (i.e., listen, encourage, pray). Take note of which of the three you gave yourself the lowest score on. How might you intentionally practice and consequently grow in that particular skill?*
- Fruitful coaches are vigilant to **holistically address (1) personal, (2) spiritual, and (3) ministerial needs** of leaders in their care. It has been well said that our goal is to **use ministry to get people done, rather than using people to get ministry done**. We should make it our aim that whenever someone decides to lead a community group, we pastor them in such a way that in hindsight they end up pointing back to their decision to lead as one of the greatest contributions to their spiritual growth that they've ever received!
- Fruitful coaching is primarily concerned to pastor the heart of the leader towards greater reliance on, delight in, and obedience to, Jesus. What the leader is believing and desiring (their heart) will inevitably be expressed in what they do and say. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt 12:34). Therefore, fruitful coaches "**aim for the heart**" in every conversation. In all our conversations with leaders, we should always make it our aim to **move the conversation one step deeper**—inching ever closer to matters of the heart. What are they believing and desiring? Thinking and wanting? How are their beliefs and desires being revealed in what they're doing and saying? Because fruitful coaching is heart-centered, it is also necessarily hedonistic. The heart is the seat of our desires, and therefore fruitful coaches seek to entice leaders with promises of the deeper delight



that can be found in Jesus, rather than try and drive leaders with a sense of duty divorced from delight. Fruitful coaches **call leaders to obedience to Jesus** because fruitful coaches truly believe that in so doing they **call leaders to joy in Jesus**.

- Fruitful coaching seeks to **uniquely equip each leader to do the work of the ministry** (Eph 4:11-16). Does this leader sitting in front of you know what their spiritual gifts are? If they do, are they fanning them into flame (2 Tim 1:6)? Are they learning how to exercise them in increasingly edifying and skillful ways?
- Fruitful coaching is done intentionally and “on purpose.” Fruitful coaches **leave nothing to chance**.
 - Leaving nothing to chance will require that most coaches take notes, capture information, and refer back to it as a means of better walking alongside, and “keeping up with their story.” Coaches should approach subsequent meetings with a c-group leader with an increasingly clear change agenda for that leader.
 - Leaving nothing to chance requires coaches to proactively pursue c-group leaders, even when those leaders act like or even say that “everything is fine.” Leaving nothing to chance requires coaches to be constantly asking “What does spiritual growth and change look like in this leader’s life, this year, and how am I called to walk alongside them well in that movement from where they are to where Jesus wants them to go?”
 - This kind of change agenda doesn’t just emerge out of the blue, but is instead the by-product of note-taking, thoughtful reflection after conversations, prayer, and carefully deciding what should be addressed in subsequent meetings. This will require, in the words of Ed Welch, that we know how to both (1) recommend and (2) notice small steps.
 - Leaving nothing to chance will require that we grow increasingly aware of our particular tendencies and weaknesses—particularly as it relates to being either primarily a “hinge” person or a “door” person. David Powlison explains: Half of us are really good at creating doorways. “Door” people tend to be really good at loving and knowing the other person, but they don’t know how to turn the doorknob. They know tons of things and they really care, but they don’t know where to go. The questions they ask don’t have a direction. They tend to gravitate towards community group leadership. The other half of us are really good with “hinges.” There are no doors, no curiosity for greater context, no real reason to want to listen. They see right and wrong, they see some of the choice points, etc., but the talk doesn’t build on the right foundation. They tend to be the pastors and seminarians in the church. If you are a “door” person then it would be worthwhile to **take what you know and process it**. There is a discipline to organizing what you hear and see, and to set goals. If you are a “hinge” person, it might be worthwhile as a discipline in your conversation to *bracket* what you are going to say. **“Let me make sure I know this person first.” “What is one thing (as opposed to ten action steps) that this person should get hold of?”**
- Our c-group leaders are called to be “subversives,” as Eugene Peterson says, and so fruitful coaches also must **be subversives**, pastoring and equipping every leader to be a subversive. What do I mean by “subversive?” Peterson explains:

Most... suppose that the goals they have for themselves and the goals God has for them are the same. It is the oldest religious mistake: refusing to countenance any real difference between God and us, imagining God to be a vaguely imagined extrapolation of our own desires, and then hiring a priest to manage the affairs between self and the extrapolation. And I, one of the priests they hired, am having none of it. But if I'm not willing to help them become what they want to be, what am I doing taking their pay? I am being subversive. I am undermining the kingdom of self and establishing the kingdom of God. I am helping them to become what God wants them to be, using the methods of subversion.

Fruitful coaches **move beyond the leader’s felt needs**, and seek to also address *deep* needs that aren't necessarily felt by the leader, but are needs nonetheless (e.g. the need to grow in enjoyment of God, the need to

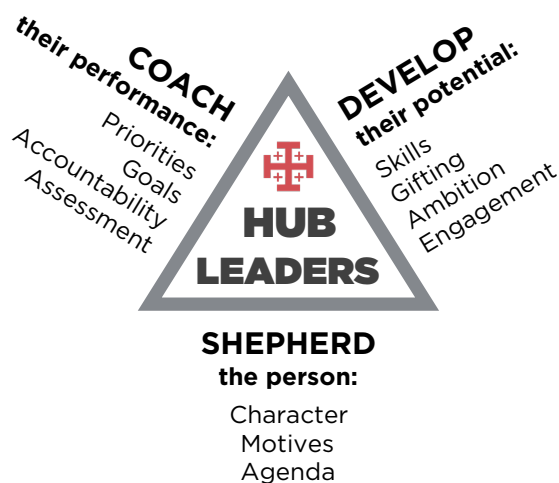


feed on the Word daily, the need to grow in dependent prayer and sensitivity to the Spirit, the need to grow in steadfast endurance of suffering for the sake of joy, etc.).

People come to these groups for many different reasons and with many different expectations, and our leaders must subvert and redirect their felt needs towards Christ's agenda for them. Todd Engstrom has described this as “meeting people where they are, and taking them where Jesus wants them to go.” In other words, as Engstrom goes on to explain, we must **love consumers, but confront consumerism, and expect change**. We must know the cultural idols that rule and reign in our city, and we must know how to subvert those, and then point to Jesus as the only hope.

Fruitful coaches are always asking themselves how they can be equipping their leaders to gently confront people's lack of commitment that hurts the health of the group. How do we equip leaders to gently re-educate their people that Jesus is not their therapist, and community is not a place to merely “consider their own needs in the presence of others,” in the words of Robert Wuthnow? In short, we must increasingly **disciple the people of God to own the mission of God**.

- More counsel from Ed Welch: To be fruitful coaches we must **consider our own hearts and life stories**. As a hub leader, can you make the connection between the details of your daily life and your relationship with the Lord? Your daily life—your work and relationships—gives you an accurate read on your relationship with Jesus. Ask yourself:
 - How are your best relationships? Your worst relationships?
 - How are your spiritual disciplines?
 - How are you growing in your battle with sin? Can you identify sin in your own life?
 - Do you ask for help? When is the last time you asked someone to pray for you, and then actually let them pray for you on the spot?
 - Do you encourage other people to do things you don't do? In other words, if you ask them to begin meditating on Scripture, do you yourself meditate on Scripture? If we're going to ask them to do something we haven't done, then we should say “we.” “We will memorize and meditate on one Scripture together this week.”
 - How are you growing in the way you turn to Jesus in the midst of suffering and hardship? In Hosea 7:14 the Lord accuses the Israelites in this way: *They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds...*
 - What are your weaknesses or common mistakes in everyday conversation? *Take a moment to jot down perhaps one strength and two weaknesses.*
 - Again, do you **notice small steps**? Do you **recommend and agree on small steps**? Are you mingling your conversation with words of encouragement and comfort?



Visiting a community group

CHECKLIST

- ✓ **Call ahead.** In partnership with the community group leaders, select a date to attend their group, with the goal of connecting, observing, and giving feedback. (If you're finding it difficult to nail down a time with a particular set of leaders, pay attention to that dynamic of anxiety. Ask good questions and listen carefully. Perhaps the leaders are overwhelmed. Perhaps they are embarrassed to have you visit their group. Perhaps from a previous church they carry authoritarian notions of pastoral presence, and are anxious about your visit's effect on the group.)
- ✓ **Attend the group as a “fly on the wall.”** Remember that you are not there to lead the group—resist the urge to take over. That doesn't mean you should be cold or aloof. Be warm and encouraging. Move towards people and greet them. Ask questions and listen. Look for tangible things you can affirm. Be quick to encourage and praise. Cultivate a peaceful, pastoral, and prayerful presence. (The primary male hub leader's spouse and/or the female hub leader are welcome and encouraged to participate in group visits, but are not required to participate.)
- ✓ **Schedule a follow-up conversation.** After the group visit, meet with the group leaders—preferably in person—to debrief and share encouragement, areas to grow, blind spots, etc. This allows you to “strike while the iron is cold,” by giving you time to prayerfully organize and prioritize your feedback (e.g., instead of pointing out ten things, what's one thing they could work on right now?), as well as helping the leaders more easily receive any needed correction. Thoughtfully visiting the groups in your hub will automatically increase your level of skill and insight, as you will no longer be attempting to coach your leaders on the basis of their verbal description of their group alone. Instead, you will be able to coach your leaders on the basis of an experience you yourself have shared with them.

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS³

In seeking to measure the health of a group, consider the following kinds of questions:

1. **Is the purpose of the group clearly understood by the leaders and the members?** Is the purpose regularly being mentioned within the group? One of the main reasons people drop out of community is that they lack a clear sense of purpose. Attendance problems can often be accounted for by a failure to communicate the purpose of the group to the members or a failure to achieve the communicated purpose. When the purpose of the group is known and clearly articulated it not only affects the way in which the leader leads, it also affects the expectations, attitudes and actions of the group members.
2. **What is the quality of the group's prayer life?** A group which is maturing in prayer will find that its prayer is kingdom-focused—centered on God's purposes and their accomplishment. Even personal prayer requests will have God's glory as their chief concern. The group will also be praying for the ministries of the church. The prayer life of the group ought not to be always and only self-focused, or else it will become ingrown over time.
3. **Do you sense that people in the group are growing into spiritual maturity?** What is the evidence for this? Groups do not meet just for the sake of meeting. Community group can quickly become a place to merely hide in plain sight. Gospel community exists in order to enable us to better love God, love people, and push back darkness. Nothing changes if nothing changes. With some reflection, you ought to be able to point to particular ways in which individuals are growing, inch by inch, into the likeness of Christ.

³ A portion of this material is adapted from the *Fellowship Group Handbook*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Version 2.0, 1997.



4. **Is the group growing as a spiritual family?** When a group is growing in their sense of belonging to one another a number of things will be happening. Individuals will feel a sense of responsibility for one another. They will be praying for one another outside of the group time. They will be spending time with one another outside of the family meal. They will be sitting together and checking on each other on Sundays. Individuals will have a sense of being stronger when they are with the group.
5. **Is there an atmosphere of openness, warmth, honest, sincerity, and genuineness?** Usually the group leaders set the tone in the group for each of these things. If they lead with openness, honesty, warmth, humility, and sincerity, the group will usually follow and imitate what they observe. A stiff, wooden, flat, cold, religious, or hierarchical atmosphere will tend to drive people away.
6. **Does the group have a sense of being a part of the larger church?** The group should feel connected to the larger church, not isolated. If they *do* feel connected, they will be enthusiastic about what is going on in the life of the church. They will be praying for the ministries of the church. Individuals in the group will be becoming members, and they will increasingly be giving generously and serving faithfully.
7. **Is the group growing in size?** Healthy groups tend to grow numerically. As a result of the personal growth that people within the group are experiencing, they desire that others would be enjoying the same experience and therefore invite them in.
8. **Does the group benefit from primary and assistant leadership?** In other words, is the group led by more than one household? A true plurality that brings with it a sharing of burdens and a complementarity in gifting and perspective usually requires at least two households on the leadership team—regardless of whether each household consists of a single person or a married couple. Further, one of the marks of a healthy group is that it is multiplying. Frontline Church exists to multiply gospel communities. However, a group that is not developing gospel leaders cannot multiply gospel communities. Healthy groups take leadership development seriously.
9. **Does the group begin and end on time?** People will be far more likely to faithfully come to the group if they can count on it beginning and ending on schedule. It is inconsiderate and breaks trust with people if the leaders regularly go over their announced ending time.
10. **What is the time break-down among the various elements (meal, Scripture, sharing, prayer) within the group?** A group should provide a balance between these elements. If the group is dominated by intellectual discussion, and gives personal sharing and prayer the leftovers of the meeting, this will have an adverse effect on the group. Prayer should not be an addendum to group gatherings, but should instead be a substantive portion of group gatherings.
11. **What is their method for leading times of discussion?** Do the leaders speak much more than everyone else? If they are giving a monologue rather than encouraging a dialogue about Scripture, then people's satisfaction with the group will decrease and they will stop participating. Community group gatherings are not primarily intended to be a time for leaders to display their teaching gifts, however good they may be. Instead, it provides an opportunity for people to discuss together what Scripture is saying and apply it to their lives, as well as articulate and develop their own beliefs. In order to facilitate conversation in the most edifying way, leaders should think of themselves as snipers. Their facilitation should be characterized by lots of vigilant listening, stillness, and drawing out of others' hearts, coupled with only very occasionally dispensing a thoughtful, concise, and well-aimed contribution.
12. **What are the "on-ramps" to the other rhythms of community?** If people do not regularly hear about the need for spiritual formation and the opportunity to join a discipleship group, they are unlikely to participate in that rhythm. Likewise, groups that do not carve out time to pray for their "three," or talk about ways to push back darkness in their city, will rarely gather for mission.



13. **What is the size of the group?** Once a group grows larger than ten to twenty adults in attendance, one's ability to participate is significantly reduced. Inability to participate decreases satisfaction with the group and leads to drop-out. (The range given is so wide because there are other factors at play that will affect how large a group subjectively “feels” to its members. Eleven adults with fifteen kids might feel chaotic and unmanageable sooner than a group of seventeen adults with three kids, or twenty-one adults with no kids.)
14. **Do you sense that people bring enthusiasm and expectancy to the group gathering? Why or why not?** Usually a lack of expectancy and enthusiasm is a function of the other diagnostic questions raised here. This is a helpful question to ask to prevent us from being dishonest about some of the other categories. A lack of purpose, a lack of participation, a failure to be ministered to or be able to minister to others, etc., can all lead to a lack of enthusiasm in the group. Then again, maybe everyone got to bed too late this week, or is still recovering from a bout of the flu!
15. **Does everyone participate in the group? If not, why not?** If people do not have the opportunity to participate, their sense of satisfaction with the group will be greatly diminished. There are many potential reasons for a lack of participation. The group may be too large. The group may not perceive that there is an atmosphere of openness. Discussions may be being led in too much of a monologue style, etc. You will have to determine what the cause is and how to address it, but make no mistake. Whatever the cause, it won't address itself.
16. **What is the quality of participation in the group?** Are people moving towards each other and having thoughtful conversations? Are people “speaking truth in love” to one another or does conversation tend to stick to superficial, “low risk” subjects? Are people aiming for the heart, and speaking out of a desire to build others up and minister to them, or are they “speaking to hear themselves speak”?
17. **Do people sense that they are valuable to the group?** Are they given ownership in the group through being encouraged to use their gifts? Are they able to contribute to the group by helping with various tasks? A healthy Christian community is marked by all its members becoming increasingly involved contributors to the life of the group. A person's sense of belonging is greatly enhanced when they believe they are doing things that are significant for the wellbeing of the group. A person should have a sense that they would be missed if for some reason he or she were not in attendance.
18. **Is their attendance fairly consistent?** If not, to what do they attribute the inconsistency? Perhaps it is just the lifestyle of the broader culture that leads to sporadic attendance. However, it could also be that people don't understand the importance and the nature of Christian community—that we need each other and are interdependent. Or perhaps they do not sense that they are valued, and don't believe they will be missed if they are absent.
19. **Do the leaders take responsibility for the health of the group?** Are they proactive (rather than controlling)? Are they patient (rather than grumbling)? Do they know how to avoid blaming themselves for the immaturity of their people on the one hand, while still taking responsibility to humbly correct, exhort, and pursue those entrusted into their care on the other? Do they tend to blame shift and act helpless (rather than redemptively move towards, pray for, and correct those in their care)? We should slow down and listen carefully if a leader consistently attributes all the issues in their group to broad, ethereal cultural forces. If a leader is always metaphorically playing you a video of the behavior of the people in their group, and they themselves are always the one holding the camera, and are never “in the shot,” it could be helpful to explore with them how their behavior is more intertwined with the behavior of their group members than they might realize. Listen for a tone of helplessness or victimhood in a leader. Seek to help them aim at meaningful ways to take responsibility to cultivate health in their group—while avoiding the ditch control on the one hand, or abdication on the other. In a marriage and in a community group, we want to look for and play a copy of the tape where everyone's in the shot.



What Questions Does a Biblical Counselor Suggest We Ask?



Article
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All vital ministry of Word and Spirit arises at an intersection: Truth meets truth. Divine Redeemer meets honest human need. So when two (or more) people meet in discipleship or pastoral counseling, they must get on the table the key elements of that more profound meeting that changes lives today and for all time. There is a 'real time' relationship between God and every one of His creatures. Something is at stake today, however consciously faithful or blindly disobedient we are. If this is so, then two key questions must weave throughout all that is said and done in discipleship.

First, what is *this* person facing in life? To put it more pointedly, what is *your* greatest struggle and need *right now*? Where will you face *today's* crucial choices? In that moment, in that situation, what will you do? How will you treat people? What will you believe? Where will you place (or misplace) your trust? What will you want? How will you react in that circumstance? These questions look for the significant, decisive choice points in a person's everyday life: "When you face that situation, which way will you turn?"

Second, what does the Lord say that *speaks directly* into what you are facing? Who is He? What is He doing? What does He promise? What does He will? And what does He call you to believe, need, trust, hope, and obey? These questions explore a person's current perceptions of the God who is there and is not silent. Is what God says and does immediately relevant or basically irrelevant?

Both questions enable us to work together on what counts. Ministry is always in the business of helping people make connections they haven't been making. It's always reinterpreting what's going on, in order to identify the redemptive opportunities in what seem like the same old ruts. It traces out previously unseen practical implications of life in Christ. It's always remaking minds, hearts, and lifestyles that are still misshapen. These questions will help you to say the timely, significant, and appropriate words that help bring to pass such a discipling of lives.

The first question helps us grasp the "stage" (providentially arranged by the Vinedresser) on which growth (or hardening) takes place every day. It makes discipleship relevant. Occasionally there is a "big" issue, a huge u-turn, a major choice of life direction. But usually the watershed moments occur in the tiny choices of life: the words we say or don't say, the attitudes we adopt or resist, the tasks we pick up or shirk, the ways we love or ignore another, our reaction to some typical trouble. If love is the Spirit's fruit, we need Him right then and there.

The second question helps us grasp what this person does (or does not) understand about God and how He meets us. It enables discipleship to build on and to reinforce what someone already knows (But, oh how easily we forget, get distracted, or turn willfully away!). You can then judiciously add what someone doesn't yet know that makes a difference. Often people we disciple already "know" significant truth, but they don't *know* it in a way that changes their lives. Discipleship does the hard work of kneading what is true into how we actually live.

You will ask these two questions in a hundred different ways. They are things that you the discipler must continually ask of everything you see and hear, whether or not you actually pose these questions out loud. You are looking for the significant real-time choice points – today, this week, during this season of this person's life. You are looking for the places where you can say to another, "*Here* is where you need *this* grace and truth." I'll often say to someone, "The Vinedresser uses pruning shears, not a chain saw. He's not going to work on everything all at once. He's not going to make you face every kind of trouble right now. He's not going to change everything in you or teach you everything about Himself. But *something* about who He is and what He says to you can make a decisive difference in *some* challenge you are facing right now." In discipling another, I am doing nothing more than pursuing the same line of questioning and reasoning that I myself need, and that I find the Discipled takes with me. God meets you exactly where you are. That's all these questions are about.

I suspect that most of our discipleship efforts do better at teaching people basic theology, Bible knowledge, principles of Christian ethics, God's promises, ministry techniques, and the disciplines of grace than they do at asking the good questions that make all those good teachings sparkle with relevance. I've found such probing to be hugely fruitful. It helps me to better understand the people God has called me to serve (even as it helps me to understand myself). It helps others to better understand how God meets them in real life (even as it helps me).

It is also significant that these two questions help you to understand Scripture. Think about that one for a minute. You should ask the same things of the Bible that you ask of people. Of course, and why not? The Bible is about people, and troubles, and mercies, and choices, and struggles, and hope. So ask of Scripture, What were those people over there back then facing? What did God choose to show and tell in meeting them? Today's specific situations and choices are never exactly the same, but there are always common themes. And though our saving God never works in exactly the same way twice, He is always the same yesterday, today, and forever.

These two questions help you to get a feel for how Scripture operates. The Word is not a textbook of normative and propositional truths. It does not operate like a systematic theology text, dense with abstracted propositions logically arranged. And it is not a treasury of verse-sized proof-texts. A topical study using a concordance is often not the best way to understand something biblically. The Bible is not a how-to book, a self-help book, or inspirational reading. Scripture does not work like some handbook chock full of abstracted principles, advice, steps, sayings, and cheering anecdotes. Instead, the Word of God reveals God's person, promises, ways, and will in action onto the "stage" and into the "story" of real human lives. Our two questions attune us to that; they arise from becoming attuned to that. In our discipling ministry, we should seek to work in much the same way that Scripture works. We are discipling the same kinds of people who originally received any particular chunk of the Word. So let's get the living God into the daily watershed moments! Let me summarize, and then illustrate.

At every turn the Word of God shows people facing particular challenges and choice points. Amid the troubles and opportunities of their lives, they are tempted to believe particular lies, to choose particular wrongs, and to live in ways that are ugly, perverse, and complicated (this is our Question 1).

And Scripture shows forth the bright Lord of life, the true and living God who enters the human condition redemptively, making wrongs right, speaking wisdom that we need (this is our Question 2).

And, amid all the troubles and opportunities, Scripture shows forth some people believing what is true, choosing what is good, and living in ways that are simply beautiful – people after God's own heart. They need, seek, and turn to the Lord. Supremely, we witness the true man after God's own heart, that bright Lord, Word made flesh, living with us, touched by our weakness, full of grace, truth and glory, loving God and neighbor (this is the goal of our discipleship).

Consider a simple example of how Scripture disciplines us amid what we face. Has anyone ever faced a threat situation more wonderfully and honestly than this?

Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, for my soul takes refuge in You, and in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge until destruction passes by. I will cry to God Most High, to God who accomplishes all things for me. He will send from heaven and save me. He reproaches him who tramples upon me. God will send forth His lovingkindness and His truth (Ps 57:1-3).

Notice all those active verbs. They describe the God that I honestly need (our Question 2 again). Are those you disciple learning such a straight-on relationship with this God?

Notice how the psalm then proceeds. A man vividly portrays his experience of facing threat—and he intends to evoke that experience in you, connecting to what you face. Imagine yourself feeling keenly threatened by people with destructive intentions . . . trampled and run over . . . surrounded and stalked by a pride of lions . . . lying helpless on the ground amid fire-breathing predators . . . assaulted by violent killers whose mouths are spears, arrows, and swords . . . trapped by people out to get you, who spread a net and dig a pit in order to catch you (57:3, 4, 6). In the words of *Jurassic Park*, "The velociraptors are out." Terrorists are

in your town. But that's just the extreme version of everyday life in the human jungle. Gossips and backbiters talk it up in your workplace. Factions spring up in your church. Family members manipulate, nag, lie, scheme, and gang up on you in order to get their way. That other driver, gripped by road rage, mouths and gestures obscenities at you. So what are *you* facing today? Anything that threatens you? (our Question 1 again) The psalm makes the experience of threat chillingly specific, but it leaves specific circumstances undefined. That invites disciples to insert their own personalizing details.

Notice further, right amid this disturbing and difficult experience, the astonishing centerpiece of the psalm: "Be exalted above the heavens, O God. Let Your glory be above all the earth" (57:5). It is a wonder. Here is the living faith towards which true discipleship aims. Pointedly placed right in the midst of troubles, this is a whole different way of seeing things and responding. These sentences are the pivot around which everything in the psalm turns. I guarantee you, the people you disciple don't yet think this way very often. You and I don't think this way very often. People who feel threatened usually react with fear, retaliation, or escapism. They forget the exalted One. Discipleship aims to help such people remember.

And finally, has anyone ever expressed the essence of joy more wonderfully and honestly than this?

My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast. I will sing, yes, I will sing praises! Awake, my glory! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn. I will give thanks to You, O Lord, among the peoples. I will sing praises to You among the nation, for Your lovingkindness is great to the heavens and Your truth to the clouds. Be exalted above the heavens, O God. Let Your glory be above all the earth (Psalm 57:7-11).

Here on the stage of real time troubles and choice points, we have heard and seen in operation the two chief modes of faith: need and gladness. We have witnessed a disciple, an image bearer, a man after God's heart in the midst of his thinking, feeling, and acting.

Such living faith is the fountainhead of the final goal of our discipleship: all the practicalities and necessities of obedience to God, love, service, courage, holy resistance to evil, and mercy. Our discipleship aims for these beautiful and practical actions on the stage of real life. Psalm 57 doesn't go there. It's only a short video clip of the vertical dimension operating amid life's troubles. But it sets up the horizontal dimension: Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 13, Romans 12, 1 Peter, Luke 6:21-49 . . . and the rest of the Lord's ethic of practical love operating amid hardships. This is the payoff; these small, constructive, and otherwise inexplicable obediences are the payoff. Faith works through love. These are the how-to's of forgiveness transacted, of making constructive choices, of good communication, of vigorous peacemaking, of wise decision-making, of financial stewardship, and all the rest. This is 'the image of Christ' working into a disciple's heart and working out into a disciple's walk.

These two simple questions—**What are you facing? How does the Lord connect?**—express the core agenda of our discipleship. They set up the call to explicit faith and explicit love.

By David Powlison