GARDEN

Relational Evangelism Study

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

Week 4 - Ask Better Questions
Understand, Clarify, and Test Ideas

BIG IDEA

Thoughtful questions help us understand people, uncover assumptions, test reasoning, and move conversations forward without requiring us to dominate the conversation.

Leader Preparation

Purpose of Week 4

Week 4 develops the questioning skill introduced in Weeks 2-3. Participants learn that questions can clarify meaning, discover reasons, test assumptions and reasoning, keep the burden of proof appropriately placed, and open doors for deeper conversation.

The Stage Three Project advances by producing **3-5 actual questions** tailored to the participant's person and issue.

Before the Meeting

Read **Matthew 22:15-46** and **1 Peter 3:15**. Review your own Stage Three issue and draft several questions. Say them aloud so you can notice whether they sound curious or prosecutorial.

Your Role

Help participants become more strategic without becoming manipulative. Reward genuine curiosity. When a question sounds like a speech with a question mark at the end, help shorten it. When someone identifies a contradiction, ask how they could explore it while preserving gentleness and respect.

> **The goal is not merely better questions. It is better conversations in service of truth and love.**

Participant Study Begins

How to Use This Study

Read the material aloud together, switching readers at each section break. When you reach a **DISCUSS** section, pause and discuss the questions as a group. When you reach a **REFLECT** or **MY STAGE THREE PROJECT** section, take a few minutes to write individually before continuing. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture passages should also be read aloud together.

> **No one needs to teach the lesson. Work through it together.**

Scripture First

As you read **Matthew 22:15-46**, pay attention to the questions in the passage. Notice **who asks them, why they are asked, how Jesus answers, and when Jesus responds with a question of his own.**

Matthew 22:15-46

DISCUSS

1. What different purposes do questions serve in this passage?

2. How does Jesus avoid being controlled by the assumptions built into the questions he is asked?

3. What happens when Jesus begins asking questions?

4. Does Jesus use questions instead of truth claims, or together with them?

5. What can we learn from Jesus about the difference between a sincere question and a question designed to trap someone?

> **LEADER NOTE - QUESTIONS IN CONTEXT**
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> Do not turn this passage into a claim that every question Jesus asks is a model we can copy directly. Jesus has unique authority and insight. The useful observation is broader: questions can clarify, expose assumptions, redirect a conversation, and make a person think. Also notice that Jesus both **asks** and **answers**. GARDEN is not replacing proclamation with endless questioning.

Questions Change the Conversation

Many Christians imagine evangelism primarily as giving answers.

Answers matter. Christianity makes truth claims, and mature believers should increasingly be able to explain and defend them.

But answers are only part of a good conversation.

> **Before you can answer well, you often need to understand what the other person actually means.**

A statement that sounds simple may hide several different claims.

> **"I don't believe in God because there's no evidence."**

What does **God** mean to this person? What would count as **evidence**? Do they mean no evidence exists, or that they have not encountered evidence they find persuasive? What standard of evidence are they using?

If you immediately launch into an argument, you may spend ten minutes answering a claim they were not actually making.

A thoughtful question slows the conversation down long enough to understand it.

Four Jobs a Good Question Can Do

1. CLARIFY

Clarifying questions help you understand words, claims, and experiences.

> **"What do you mean by that?"**
> **"When you say Christianity is harmful, what kind of harm do you have in mind?"**
> **"What do you mean when you say you're spiritual but not religious?"**

Clarification protects us from arguing against a position the person does not actually hold.

2. DISCOVER REASONS

Some statements are conclusions. Questions help us discover what supports them.

> **"How did you come to that conclusion?"**
> **"What makes you think that is true?"**
> **"Was there something in particular that changed your mind?"**

This is not automatically a challenge. Sometimes you genuinely do not know why the person believes what they believe.

3. TEST ASSUMPTIONS AND REASONING

Some questions invite a person to examine what follows from their view.

> **"If morality is entirely subjective, what would make slavery actually wrong rather than merely something our culture dislikes?"**
> **"If only things proven by science are rational to believe, can that rule itself be proven scientifically?"**

These questions do more than gather information. They test whether an idea is internally consistent or whether an assumption can support the weight being placed on it.

4. OPEN A DOOR

Questions can also create natural opportunities for spiritual conversation.

> **"You said that experience changed the way you think about God. What did you believe before that?"**
> **"Do you ever think about whether there might be something beyond the material world?"**

The goal is not to force the door open. It is to notice when a meaningful question might open it a little wider.

LEADER NOTE - FOUR FUNCTIONS, NOT FOUR STEPS

Participants do not need to run through these categories in order. A single question may do more than one job. The categories are meant to help them design better questions and recognize what they are trying to accomplish.

The Burden of Proof

Suppose someone says:

> **"There is no evidence that Jesus ever existed."**

A Christian may immediately feel responsible to produce a historical case for Jesus.

Eventually, that may be useful. But notice what just happened: **the other person made a claim.**

Claims need reasons.

A simple response might be:

> **"What makes you think Jesus never existed?"**

Now the person who made the claim has an opportunity to explain the basis for it.

This is sometimes called keeping the **burden of proof** where it belongs.

It does not mean you never need to defend Christianity. Christians make claims too, and when we do, we should be prepared to give reasons.

> **The principle is simple: the person making a claim should be willing to give some reason for believing it.**

Questions help prevent us from assuming responsibility for disproving every assertion someone makes.

LEADER NOTE - BURDEN OF PROOF WITHOUT COMBATIVENESS

This concept can easily become argumentative if presented as "make them prove it." Keep the tone conversational. The goal is to understand the reason behind a claim and avoid accepting unsupported assertions as though they were established facts. Christians must accept the same standard for their own claims.

The Columbo Approach

Greg Koukl has popularized a questioning approach he calls the **Columbo Tactic**, named after the television detective who often appeared puzzled and kept asking one more question.

The basic posture is not:

> **"I am going to destroy your argument."**

It is closer to:

> **"Help me understand what you mean and how you arrived there."**

Three extremely useful questions are:

> **"What do you mean by that?"**
> **"How did you come to that conclusion?"**
> **"Have you ever considered...?"**

The first clarifies.

The second asks for reasons.

The third can gently introduce a difficulty, alternative, or Christian perspective.

These are not magic words. They are habits of mind.

> **Be curious enough to understand. Be thoughtful enough to notice what follows.**

Questions Are Not a Disguise for a Speech

There is a bad way to use questions.

You already know exactly what you want to say, but instead of saying it honestly, you ask a series of leading questions designed to corner the person into your conclusion.

The conversation begins to feel like cross-examination.

That is not what we are aiming for.

A thoughtful question should leave room for an answer you did not expect.

> **If you are not willing to listen to the answer, you are not really asking a question.**

Strategic questions can challenge ideas. But the person should still feel like a person, not a witness being trapped on the stand.

LEADER NOTE - THIS IS THE RELATIONAL GUARDRAIL

This may be the most important caution in Week 4. Strategic questioning is powerful, which means it can also be manipulative. Encourage participants to watch tone, facial expression, pacing, and the number of questions they ask in succession. A good conversation is not an interrogation.

A Claim Is Not the Same as an Argument

Consider this statement:

> **"Religion is just something humans invented because they are afraid of death."**

That may sound like an explanation of Christianity. But at this point it is only a claim.

You could respond with a long defense of Christianity.

Or you could ask:

> **"What makes you think fear of death is what caused belief in God?"**

Perhaps the person has reasons. Perhaps they are repeating something they heard. Perhaps they have never considered what evidence would be needed to establish the claim.

A question helps reveal the difference.

Now consider another statement:

> **"You only believe Christianity because you were raised Christian."**

One useful question might be:

> **"If someone's upbringing influences a belief, does that tell us whether the belief is true or false?"**

The question shifts attention from the **cause of a belief** to the **truth of the belief**.

That distinction matters in many worldview conversations.

DISCUSS

Why can a confident assertion sound more persuasive than it actually is?

What is the difference between explaining why someone believes something and showing that the belief is false?

Can Christians make the same mistake by repeating claims they have never examined? Give examples.

How can a question expose weak reasoning without humiliating the person?

Tone Matters

The exact same words can communicate curiosity or contempt.

> **"What do you mean by that?"**

can mean:

I genuinely want to understand.

Or it can mean:

I am about to show everyone how foolish that was.

People usually notice the difference.

First Peter 3:15 calls Christians to be prepared to give a reason for their hope, but it also describes the manner in which we respond: **gentleness and respect.**

> **A good question with a bad spirit is still a bad witness.**

Our goal is not merely to learn questioning techniques. It is to become the kind of people who can pursue truth while genuinely loving the person in front of us.

LEADER NOTE - RETURN TO 1 PETER 3:15

Week 1 used this passage to discuss preparedness. Here it provides the relational guardrail: reasons, gentleness, and respect belong together. If participants become excited about exposing contradictions, keep returning to character and tone.

Conversation in Practice

Imagine a friend says:

> **"I could never be a Christian. Christianity is anti-science."**

Consider four possible questions:

Question A

"What do you mean by anti-science?"

Function: Clarify.

Question B

"Was there a particular scientific issue that led you to that conclusion?"

Function: Discover reasons and story.

Question C

"Do you think science can answer every kind of question, or mainly questions about the physical world?"

Function: Explore an assumption.

Question D

"Would you be open to considering examples of major scientists who have believed in God?"

Function: Open a door toward additional information.

DISCUSS

Which question would you probably ask first? Why?

What might you learn from Question B that you would miss by immediately defending Christianity?

Which question has the greatest potential to feel argumentative if the tone is wrong?

What answer might the person give that would cause you to change the direction of the conversation?

REFLECT - Rewrite the Response

Below are several common statements. Instead of answering them, write one thoughtful question you might ask first.

"There are so many religions. Nobody can know which one is true."

"The Bible has been changed too many times to trust it."

"A good God would never send anyone to hell."

"Morality is just personal opinion."

"I don't need religion to be a good person."

MY STAGE THREE PROJECT

Week 4 - Develop Your Questions

Return to your person and the issue you identified. Your task this week is to develop **3-5 questions** you could naturally use to understand the issue and help the person think more deeply.

Do not try to write five traps. Aim for a mixture of clarification, reasons, assumptions, and possible openings.

My person: _____

My issue:

Question 1 - Clarify what they mean:

Question 2 - Understand their reasons or story:

Question 3 - Explore an assumption or implication:

Question 4 - Another useful question:

Question 5 - A possible doorway toward the Christian perspective:

Which question would I most naturally ask first?

What answer might cause me to realize I misunderstood the issue?

The goal is not to predict the whole conversation. Prepare good questions, then listen to the answers.

LEADER NOTE - REVIEW THEIR QUESTIONS BY FUNCTION

If participants share their questions, help refine them. Ask: Is this genuinely understandable? Is it one question or a disguised paragraph? Does it assume too much? Does it invite an answer? Could it sound accusatory? What is the question trying to accomplish? Strong questions are usually shorter than participants first write them.

From Questions to Answers

Week 4 emphasizes questions, but GARDEN is not a method for avoiding Christian truth claims.

At some point, a person may ask:

"Okay, so what do you believe?"

We should want to answer.

Or a question may reveal a mistaken assumption that deserves a direct response.

The rhythm of a healthy conversation can move back and forth:

ASK -> LISTEN -> CLARIFY -> EXPLAIN -> ASK AGAIN -> LISTEN

Questions help us earn understanding of the conversation. Knowledge helps us contribute something meaningful to it.

Next week we will begin strengthening that knowledge.

Discussion

1. Which of the four jobs of a question - clarify, discover reasons, test assumptions, open a door - do you use least naturally?

2. Why do people sometimes feel attacked when their beliefs are questioned? How can we reduce unnecessary defensiveness without avoiding difficult ideas?

3. When should a Christian stop asking questions and give an answer?

4. How can questions appropriately keep the burden of proof on the person making a claim without becoming combative?

5. What is the danger of using questions only to expose contradictions?

6. How can we distinguish a sincere question from a rhetorical trap?

7. Think of a past spiritual conversation. What question do you wish you had asked?

8. How might becoming better at questions change your confidence even on topics where your knowledge is still limited?

> **LEADER NOTE - DEPTH OVER COMPLETION**
>
> These questions integrate the entire week. Let productive discussion continue. In particular, questions 3-6 help prevent the group from confusing strategic questioning with conversational gamesmanship.

This Week in the GARDEN

This week, practice **curiosity with purpose**.

ASK ONE MORE QUESTION

When a meaningful belief or objection comes up, resist the urge to answer immediately. Ask one appropriate question first.

LISTEN TO THE WHOLE ANSWER

Do not spend the answer planning your next move. Listen for what the person means, why they believe it, and what may be underneath it.

NOTICE CLAIMS

When someone makes a strong claim, mentally ask: **What reason supports that?** You do not need to challenge every claim, but learn to notice the difference between assertion and argument.

REFINE YOUR 3-5 QUESTIONS

Work on the questions for your Stage Three Project. Say them aloud. Make them sound like something you would actually say to this person.

PRAY

Ask God for wisdom, genuine curiosity, gentleness, courage, and discernment about when to ask, when to listen, and when to speak.

Pray Together

Pray for your Stage Three people and for the character required to ask good questions well.

Ask God for **humility that listens, wisdom that notices assumptions, courage that does not avoid truth, gentleness that refuses to humiliate, and opportunities for meaningful conversation.**

Before Week 5

Bring your Stage Three Project notes and your 3-5 questions next week.

You should now have: **one person, one issue, a knowledge inventory, and several thoughtful questions designed for that actual person.**

Next week we move into the most research-intensive part of the project:

> **When the Pressure Is Off.**

You will learn how to use the space **between conversations** to understand the strongest version of an objection, build a responsible Christian response, and identify resources worth sharing.

After the Meeting - Leader Reflection

Did participants understand the different functions questions can serve?

Did burden of proof language become combative, or did the group understand it as a fairness principle?

Were participants able to distinguish genuine questions from rhetorical traps?

Did their Stage Three questions sound natural for the actual relationship?

Were any questions based on assumptions the person has never expressed?

Who needs help making questions shorter, clearer, or less confrontational?

Did the group preserve the place of direct Christian explanation rather than treating questions as an end in themselves?

Leader Preview - Week 5

Week 5 moves into deliberate research. Participants will begin building the **UNDERSTAND** and **EXPLAIN** portions of Stage Three readiness: steelmanning the objection, identifying the Christian response, finding relevant evidence and arguments, and selecting trustworthy resources. Keep the focus narrow enough that each participant can make substantial progress on one real issue.