

THE CHRISTIAN TEACHER

by

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CHAPTER NINE

Interrogation

THE REAL test of a teacher is the *response* of his pupils. He must not only instruct, but educate - lead out his pupils. The word “*teaching*” comes from the Anglo-Saxon derivative *taecho*, meaning, “*to show how to do.*” Teaching, then, is not telling; in fact, often he teaches best who talks least. Teaching of necessity is a probing process in which the surgical instrument is the question. The response of the pupil, like the recovery of the patient, will depend on the skill with which the instrument is used. Questioning has an important part in the teacher-pupil relationship.

- It keeps the pupils at work with their teacher to a common end.
- It accomplishes much in gaining and sustaining attention.
- It clarifies the truth which is to be taught.

But more than anything else, questioning has a large place in making the teacher and the pupils co-workers in the completion of the teaching process. Anybody can ask questions. But not everybody can ask questions that really teach. There is doubtful value in asking questions from a quarterly and having the pupils respond with the printed answers in front of them. Such a method of questioning cannot do other than deaden the pupils’ interest in the Bible and create in them an aversion to the lesson hour. The question is a teaching device or weapon that can be used most powerfully and effectively in skillful hands. Questioning is an art—one of the fine arts—which when once acquired, will be the making of a teacher. Dr. Herman Harrell Horne says, “The interrogation point is the badge of the teaching profession,” while Francis Bacon declared that “the skillful question is the half of knowledge.”

Our Lord was a master of the art of questioning. In the comparatively brief record of His ministry, more than one hundred questions are recorded. Even the most casual reader of the Gospels cannot help but be impressed with such a large number of startling, unusual, and unexpected questions as He used in His utterances. At the age of twelve He was asking questions, and one of the first utterances of His public ministry was a question addressed to His first two disciples, “**What seek ye?**” And this earliest of His interrogations is typical of the thought-provoking and reflecting character of all His questions. Even in His declarative discourses He frequently interspersed His statements with such rhetorical questions as, “**What think ye?**” and “**How think ye?**” A study of our Lord’s questions is a pedagogical course in itself.

I. PURPOSE OF QUESTIONS

To appreciate the value of a good question properly addressed, it is well to know something about its purpose. In the law of the teaching process it was observed that the question was the most important stimulus to the mind, and that the actual educational process begins when a pupil asks questions.

It will be seen further that the question is used:

1. To awaken thought.

The first object of the teacher in taking up the lesson is to make a point of contact with the pupils in order to arouse interest. Generally this can best be done by a question suited to the mind of the pupils. This question will be like a fisherman's bait on a hook. If it does not appeal to the particular fish he is seeking to catch, the fish will not be attracted. The real problem of the teacher then is to ask such a question as will catch the interest of the pupils and elicit a spontaneous response.

2. To direct thought.

Once the mind has been awakened, each succeeding question must grow out of the preceding one and its answer, and all put together must lead in a definite direction toward the goal which the teacher has set. When all such questions have unity and purpose, the minds of the pupils can be successfully carried from one point to another.

3. To quicken thought.

The pupil who has a tendency to let his thoughts wander can be recalled by a question. It will throw a burning spark into his mind. An atmosphere of dullness, in which thinking becomes sluggish, can be dissipated by a series of rapid questions. There must be sufficient evidence of life and vivacity to assure a satisfactory rate of progress.

Things must move on with a certain rapidity. Questions should be asked quickly and answered just as speedily. If they cannot be answered by one, they should be passed rapidly to another. A barrage of questions will put new life into a stagnant atmosphere.

4. To apply thought.

Pupils may be brought to think on a subject without associating it in any way with themselves. The problem is to get them to apply the truth to their own lives. This can frequently be done by a question. Christ was interested in things only as they were related to the lives of men and women. "**Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?**" He asked His disciples. And when they responded, He quickly applied their thought by the personal question, "**But whom say ye that I am?**"

II. PREPARATION OF QUESTIONS

The use of printed questions read from a quarterly is too mechanical to awaken interest. Such a procedure stifles rather than stimulates. The all-important personality of the teacher is hidden behind a lesson help someone else has created.

On the other hand, until an instructor has had experience in the art of oral examination he cannot hope to frame his questions advantageously after coming to class. Almost all extemporaneous preachers write out their outlines. A good teacher will find it worthwhile to prepare a carefully worded set of questions in advance. Part of the average unwillingness on the part of the pupil to participate in the lesson is due to the teacher's lack of skill in the use of questions. The value of original, written questions will soon be appreciated. In the preparation of such a list there will be need for several types of approach to the pupils' minds.

1. Contact questions.

We have already seen that the interrogation is of value in awakening thought. Attention can be gained and interest aroused when the teacher begins the lesson, if an appropriate question has been thought out for the introduction. Many times our Lord used a question for this purpose. Perhaps the most familiar and frequent expression was, "**What think ye?**" Conversations were also introduced by such inquiries as, "**Will ye also go away?**" "**Unto what is the kingdom of God like?**" "**Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?**"

2. Rhetorical questions.

We have often heard preachers and even teachers asking questions without giving anyone time to answer. Such inquiries are injected into a discourse for effect rather than reply. If they occasion surprise, or issue a challenge, they stimulate mental activity. It is interesting to note how many of these rhetorical questions are to be found in the Sermon on the Mount.

- "**Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?**" (Matthew 6:27).
- "**Why take ye thought for raiment?**" (Matthew 6:28).
- "**Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye?**" (Matthew 7:3).
- "**Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?**" (Matthew 7:16).

Such questions, even in discourse, throw the responsibility of thinking inescapably on the pupils.

3. Factual questions.

Perhaps the easiest questions to answer are those that call for information previously given the pupil. Their greatest value is that the replies fix in the mind the instruction that has already been imparted. Since the work of a teacher is not complete until it has been tested, factual questions will reveal just how much instruction has reached its goal. For these important reasons a good teacher will be fully as much concerned that the pupil has an opportunity to reproduce knowledge as to receive it.

4. Thought-provoking questions.

Teaching is more than “hearing lessons,” and questions that adequately and permanently instruct must do more than test the pupil’s knowledge. They must help the pupil organize and apply his knowledge, and assist him in thinking for himself. They should raise questions as well as secure answers, and certainly stimulate the pupil to know more.

A witness in court will be subjected to both direct and cross-examination. His own counsel will seek by questions not only to direct his replies, but his thought as well. In other words, his case can best be furthered by permitting his counsel to think for him. The opposing lawyer, on the other hand, instead of asking him leading questions, by the most rigid examination will compel him to do his own thinking. Indeed, he will have to give all diligence to the barrage of searching questions so that his replies may be accurate and consistent. While his own counsel may direct thought, it remains for the opposing attorney to provoke thought.

A good teacher, in order to stimulate the thinking of his pupils, will not only need to examine, but to cross-examine them as well. He should prepare thought-provoking questions that involve:

a. Purpose.

While the word “what” is used to solicit information, the word “why” should be employed to determine purpose.

This is a direct appeal to the reasoning faculties of the pupil, and should be used repeatedly if independent thought is to be encouraged. Our Lord sometimes asked questions to secure information, but usually the facts were elicited to solicit a reason for action.

For instance, He struck at the consciences of His critics when He asked, **“Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?”** (Mark 3:4). **“Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?”** (Luke 6:46).

b. Opinion.

Questions which call for personal judgment are of more worth than those which solicit thought that is unrelated to the individual. It is always helpful for pupils to determine in their own minds the relative values of things.

Personal judgment was solicited by our Lord by such questions as, **“What thinkest thou, Simon?”** (Matthew 17:25), and, **“Why callest thou me good?”** (Matthew 19:17).

Many of the questions our Lord asked to strengthen faith were of this character. **“Wilt thou be made whole?”** (John 5:6); **“Believe ye that I am able to do this?”** (Matthew 9:28); **“Whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die. Believest thou this?”** (John 11:26).

c. Application.

Perhaps the most practical type of thought-provoking questions is that which seeks for a personal application of truth.

When the lawyer, seeking a debate with our Lord, raised the neighbor question, he was told the story of the Good Samaritan and asked to give his opinion as to which of the three strangers was a true neighbor. It was the lawyer's reply that called forth the divine dictum, "**Go, and do thou likewise**" (Luke 10:36, 37). The heart-searching question, "**Lovest thou me?**" that Christ put to Peter, was followed by the command, "**Feed my lambs**" (John 21:15).

III. PRACTICE OF QUESTIONS

Much of the success in the use of questions depends upon the way they are asked.

The teacher must always keep in mind the possibility of a misunderstanding. He ought to consider just how the question will strike the minds of the pupils. "What must we do to have our sins forgiven?" asked a thoughtless teacher. Consequently he was surprised when the pupil replied, "We must first sin." Nevertheless, this was the correct answer from one point of view.

If the question had been put in a different form, it would have guided the pupil in giving the answer the teacher desired. Perhaps if the question had been stated, "What must we do, that God may forgive a sin we have committed?" there would have been a clearer understanding (Berkeley, *You Can Teach*, p. 39).

There are eight principles to be observed in questioning:

1. Avoid reading questions.

It hardly need be said that questions must be asked, not read. Although previously prepared in writing, it is well not to bring them to class. Manuscripts and notes are non-conductors of personal interest, and happy is the teacher who can be independent of them. Nothing should be allowed to come between the teacher and the class during the teaching period.

2. Avoid leading questions.

While backward and bashful pupils may be encouraged to participate in the lesson by questions that suggest the answer, it is well to remember that they are not of value either to solicit information or to stimulate thought.

3. Avoid guessing questions.

Many questions that can be answered by either "yes" or "no" tempt the pupil to guess rather than to think out the answer. If the pupil does answer "yes" or "no," require proof for the response given. Only as reasons are given can such questions have value.

4. Avoid long questions or double questions.

A long sentence is retained in the pupil's mind with difficulty, and he may forget the first part in his effort to grasp the last of it. Eliminate every unnecessary word or phrase, so that the question can be stated as briefly as possible. Long, involved statements are never necessary, and are nearly always confusing.

5. Avoid indefinite questions.

Indefinite questioning usually comes from a lack of clear thinking on the part of the teacher. If the original statement is not understood, the answer will of necessity not be clear. Good questions are clear, simple, and direct. Sometimes questions are confusing because they involve more than one answer. Frequently a pupil puzzled between possible answers, will reply promptly when the question is restated in simpler form.

6. Avoid repeating questions and answers.

If pupils know that the question will be repeated, the habit of inattention to the first inquiry will develop. For that reason a question should usually not be repeated, but passed on to another pupil who is mentally alert. It is equally unfortunate when the teacher repeats the pupil's answer after him, and thus really recites the lesson. No pupil will put much life into his response if he knows that it is to be immediately reiterated.

7. State question before assigning.

Do not name the pupil before asking the question. It only embarrasses him and at once relieves the rest of the class from giving any thought to the interrogation. When the question is stated first, all are obliged to be attentive, since no one knows who will be called on to reply. This is one of the secrets of holding the attention of the class.

8. Assign questions promiscuously.

It is a mistake to ask questions in serial order so that each pupil knows just when his turn comes. The element of uncertainty as to whom the teacher will call upon next is a good incentive to alertness. Restless and mischievous pupils can be arrested by a timely question directed to them.

IV. PROVOKING OF QUESTIONS

One of the surest tests of a teacher's work is found in the questions of his pupils. Find a class that is always asking questions, and you have found a teacher who knows how to awaken minds to the search for truth. The class that is growing, really learning, will be interested. The interested class will ask questions. Even more important than the question that provokes thoughts is the one that provokes inquiry. There is a double gain in having a pupil express his thoughts. The pupil's question reveals not only his interest, but the readiness of his mind for the instruction. The question is an index that reveals to the teacher the state of the pupil's mind and its stage of development. A question from a pupil often discloses more of his thoughts and more of his needs than would appear through a score of questions from his teacher.

1. Encourage questions.

Children love to ask questions. It is to their advantage and to the advantage of the teacher also, that they should frequently be encouraged to express themselves in this way. People, and especially adults, hesitate to ask questions in a Sunday school class, for fear they will expose their ignorance. Teachers likewise, especially those who are not well acquainted with their class, often refrain from asking questions, lest the result should prove embarrassing. Yet all agree that the quickest and surest way of finding out what is not known is by the simple question and answer method. The child who has been encouraged to be inquisitive is far more likely to ask questions in later years;

2. Answer questions with questions.

A high degree of efficiency in the art of questioning has been reached when a teacher is able to answer a question with a question. This throws the responsibility of thought back on the pupil and greatly assists in the realization of that much-to-be-desired aim, of making him an independent investigator.

Note how frequently our Lord silenced His critics in this way.

When asked on one occasion by what authority He taught and healed, He agreed to reply if they could answer His question regarding John's baptism. This counter question placed our Lord's critics in a dilemma, and they were obliged to admit that they could not reply (Matthew 21:23-27). Other illustrations of counter questioning are found in Matthew 15:2, 3; 22:17-20; Luke 10:25, 26; 14:3-6; 18:18, 19.

Our Lord not only silenced His critics, but also encouraged the questions of His disciples, by asking, "**What do you think?**" (Matthew 18:12; 21:28; 26:66).

In the light of the frequency with which He used this device, one might well ask, "Who should ask more questions, the teacher or the class?" Dr. Dobbins tells of a noted teacher of law, who usually began his class period with the inquiry, "What questions have you?" If no one had a question, the lesson was reassigned and the class dismissed (Dobbins, *The Improvement of Teaching in the Sunday School*, p. 145).

Teachers ask questions, usually, in order to find out what the pupils do, or do not, know. Pupils ask questions, as a rule, because they face a difficulty which they wish cleared up. Here is an illustration of what the teacher-pupil relationship should be.

It is far better for the teacher to confront the class with a problem and challenge them to find its solution, than to present the solution and then test them afterward to see if they have grasped it.

It is human nature to move along the line of least resistance, but when teacher and pupils jointly work out the solution of problems the hard way, the result is of permanent and practical value. While the teacher is to constantly stimulate the spirit of inquiry, he must exercise caution in telling his pupils something they can find out for themselves.

QUESTIONS

1. In what respect is the question a teaching weapon or device?
2. Show how our Lord was a master of the art of questioning.
3. State the fourfold purpose of the question.
4. Why should the teacher prepare a list of questions?
5. Name four types of questions.
6. Distinguish between contact and rhetorical questions.
7. Distinguish between factual and thought-provoking questions.
8. Illustrate from our Lord's instruction thought-provoking questions that involve
 - (a) purpose,
 - (b) opinion, and
 - (c) application.
9. Give six things that are to be avoided in asking questions.
10. Make two suggestions regarding the assignment of questions.
11. Why should questions of the pupils be encouraged?
12. Illustrate how our Lord answered a question with a question.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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