

Asking the Right Questions

By Jim Eichenberger

The old joke asks, “How do you confuse a gold miner?” The answer, of course, is that you show him two shovels and tell him to take his pick! But there is a problem with this story (other than the terrible pun!). While the miner is puzzling, he is not digging.

The same is true with students who seek to mine the treasures of God’s Word. When they sit with dazed expressions on their faces, they are not digging.

Teaching methods that ask the wrong questions will keep them from obtaining the riches they seek. Students may wrongly label the Bible as boring, confusing, or irrelevant, when they are merely perceiving that the *methods* used to teach God’s Word fit one or more of those descriptions.

Let’s briefly examine the kinds of questions one might use in Bible study.

Topsoil Questions

In an extremely rich field, one might happen upon nuggets on or just below the surface. The savvy miner needs to pick them up, of course! But the problem is that the riches on or above the topsoil are soon depleted.

The Bible is an extremely rich mine. There are gems near or above the surface. The savvy teacher helps students pick them up by asking topsoil questions—queries that pick out the key words and basic facts of a Bible passage.

But the problem with topsoil questions is that when returning to the scriptural gold mine, the student might respond, “But I’ve heard that story a million times.” When teachers limit themselves to topsoil questions, students soon get the false impression that the Bible mine is “played out.”

Beware of questions that can be answered by speaking set words or phrases. Red flags are fill-in-the-blank exercises that require the student only to find a word in the text and plug it in, or activities that focus on Bible memory work without deeper exposition.

In his parable of the soils, Jesus warned of the limitations of surface knowledge and comprehension. When “the soil was shallow,” the student “had no root” (Matthew 13:5, 6). Facts alone do not prepare the student for life.

Tin Pan Questions

During a gold rush, a miner carries a simple but essential tool—a tin pan. He scoops sand and dirt into the pan, holds the pan in running water, and gently shakes it. The heavier gold falls to the bottom, and the sand and sludge are washed away.

Tin pan questions in Bible teaching do the same thing. They wash away extraneous words and help students find core principles that can be applied to their lives.

For example, when the account of Jonah is taught in a topsoil curriculum, it is only the story of a fish. But when the words of the prophet are sifted through tin pan questions, the principles of obedience in the midst of fear, or grace to the most undeserving, become obvious.

Tin pan questions go beyond comprehension to analysis and application.

An effective teacher includes questions that help identify relevant principles present in a biblical text and that direct students to apply the principles in real-life situations.

The idea of tin pan questions is found in the Bible when writers speak of grain being separated from chaff, or precious metals being separated from raw ore. The “refiner of silver” will “purify” and “purge” the student with clear application of eternal truth to relevant issues.

Treasure Chest Questions

What is the mark of a successful treasure seeker? Take a look inside his treasure chest. One will find a wide variety of gems and jewels that the adventurer saw fit to place in it.

In the same way, an effective teacher has the goal of filling the treasure chest of the student. In one of Jesus’ lesser-quoted kingdom parables, he compares one who has been properly instructed to “the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Matthew 13:52).

Treasure chest questions go beyond analysis and application of principles. These questions encourage students to take new treasured knowledge and combine it with old treasured knowledge—and use the synthesis of the two to evaluate challenges to their worldview.

Treasure chest curriculum will tie biblical knowledge with other academic disciplines and use the former to evaluate the latter.

The account of Jonah is no longer just a fish story or even a morality tale about the dangers of running from God. By understanding that Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire that would later conquer Israel, and by discovering the inhumane practices of this bloodthirsty people, students discover the depth of Jonah’s fear and the richness of God’s grace.

When the student places Jonah in its historical context and sees this book as one

of the first that speaks of promising salvation to those who are not Jews, he or she can see how saving men for God “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9) was God’s plan all along!

Furthermore, treasure chest questions may challenge the student to look at stories of current events or references to popular culture and to determine which truths are gems and which need to be discarded.

Treasure chest curriculums can teach truth with bad examples as well as good examples! Clips from popular films or lyrics from pop songs can be analyzed, the fruit of applying their messages evaluated, and the students’ storehouses can grow as they place only godly wisdom in them.

When teaching, remember the gold miner pun. It’s not the amount of questions you shovel; it is the quality of questions you pick.

Avoid using only questions that impart facts. Embrace questions that also lead students to analyze, apply, synthesize, and evaluate with God’s eternal Word.