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How to Ask Questions That Invite Revelation

Alan R. Maynes

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“To ask and to answer questions is at the heart of all learning and teaching.”¹ When gospel teachers create a desire to learn in the minds and hearts of their students, revelation can come more readily. This is especially true when the inquiring students are led to discover principles of the gospel that have power to change their lives.

Jesus the Master Teacher

As the supreme model of master teaching, Jesus asked great questions that stirred the souls of men. His questions caused listeners to think and created within them a desire to know truth. The four Gospels have over 125 different questions that Jesus used to teach, lift, and inspire. His questions caused the truths of the gospel to sink deep into the hearts and minds of His listeners. As you read through the following examples, ponder how great, and yet how simple, each question is. Notice how they invite revelation on the part of the learner.

“Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted?” (Matthew 5:13).

“For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye?” (Matthew 5:46).

“What thinkest thou, Simon?” (Matthew 17:25).

“Dost thou believe on the Son of God?” (John 9:35).

“Lovest thou me more than these?” (John 21:15).

Jesus's questions are not limited to His mortal ministry but encompass His premortal, mortal, and postmortal teachings. Looking at the questions He poses causes one to think, "Why does the Lord ask questions when He knows all of our thoughts?" The answer is because this method is one of the most effective ways to help people to think, to consider, and to believe. Elder Henry B. Eyring said, "Some questions invite inspiration. Great teachers ask those."² This article will explore the value of asking questions that invite revelation, present some thoughts on developing the talent of asking such questions, and finally, suggest methods of implementation in the classroom.

The Value of Asking Questions

Increasing student desire to learn. Questions can do many different things for students. In the first place, they can increase a student's desire to learn. When a student desires to learn, most behavioral problems will disappear. Although many students do come with a desire to learn, some need to have their desire increased. Often, they go through the motions of learning, but their minds are elsewhere. Questions can cause them to engage in the learning process because they encourage students to think. And, as Elder Robert D. Hales taught, "We must require our students to think."³ When a student ponders the doctrine, exciting things happen. This excitement is contagious and affects everything else that happens in a classroom.

Increasing student participation. "Asking good questions and directing effective discussions are primary ways to encourage . . . participation."⁴ As the interest level increases and answers are explored, students find they are enjoying, as well as learning. This participation is brought about when the teacher adopts a student focus.⁵ For the gospel to reach down deep into their hearts and minds, students need to be truly interested in discovering eternal truths. Thought-provoking questions help bring this deeper level of participation.

Measuring student understanding. Asking great questions allows a teacher to measure a student's understanding. As students answer, the teacher can assess what the class does or does not understand. "You gain this measure of your students by listening to their response to your questions."⁶ A teacher can teach above or below the level of student knowledge, which, in either case, causes boredom. The response from students allows a teacher to make maximum use of the allotted time by clearly covering those items not yet understood. It also brings all the students to an understanding of the principles being taught. The law of witnesses is applied as students validate to each other the gospel truth being considered.

Inviting revelation into students' lives. Elder Gene R. Cook taught, "The single greatest thing a teacher does is provide the environment in which people can have a spiritual experience."⁷ Questions are essential in creating the necessary environment in the gospel classroom because they prepare the minds and hearts of the students. As the students participate, they authorize and therefore enable the Holy Ghost to teach them personally.⁸ This occurs because the students exercise agency, and as they seek learning by faith, eternal truths can be discovered and internalized.

Questions help create a climate for the Spirit to come and witness to the truth. The Holy Ghost, thus invited, teaches students personally and individually. No wonder the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ, used questions so extensively to instruct and save the souls of men.

Developing the Talent of Asking Great Questions

The art of teaching. Some teaching talent comes as a gift, and some skills are acquired through instruction and practice. The appropriate use of great questions is at the center of effective teaching. It is worth every effort for a gospel teacher to develop this skill and hone it to perfection. Developing this skill requires asking the right questions during lesson preparation, not just lesson presentation.

Teacher preparation questions. This process begins with those questions a teacher asks while preparing a lesson, questions like "What was the author's intent?" "What are the most essential principles or doctrines?" "What do I want my students to know from this scripture block?" "What are the redeeming, the converting, or the life-changing principles?" Asking the proper questions during preparation invites revelation for several reasons. First, teachers will be guided as they humbly seek answers by the power of the Holy Ghost. Second, as Elder Eyring taught, "If you teach doctrinal principles the Holy Ghost will come."⁹

For years the Brethren have told us to teach Church doctrine, to teach those things taught by the prophets and apostles.¹⁰ They have told us to be "cautious and restrained and totally orthodox in all matters of Church doctrine,"¹¹ to teach "truth[s] of eternal significance,"¹² and to avoid "fried froth"¹³ or "minutia and insignificant things."¹⁴ President Boyd K. Packer taught, "True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior."¹⁵ If teachers are looking for the nonessential, insignificant tidbits and facts or a "theological Twinkie,"¹⁶ that is what they will find. However, when teachers offer "students the benefit of a broader view,"¹⁷—looking for the intent of the inspired writer, the life-changing and converting principles that apply to the students—the Holy Ghost will accompany their study. Therefore, gospel teachers should "stay

in the heart of the mine where the real gold is.”¹⁸ Then, the power of the Spirit promised to gospel teachers can distill upon them as a gift from heaven. This endowment of the Spirit comes because “the Holy Ghost’s job is to testify of truths of eternal significance.”¹⁹

Being guided by the Spirit in *what to teach* is the place for a teacher to begin developing the ability to ask great questions. Looking for the important, the essential principles and doctrines will draw a teacher close to God. During His mortal ministry, Jesus focused His teachings on the basic principles of the gospel, and the Brethren likewise follow this pattern. Gospel teachers should do the same. When the teacher focuses on essential principles and doctrines, keeping the students in mind, the Holy Ghost is invited into the preparation process.

Searching questions. The Lord has given commandments to search the scriptures (see D&C 1:37; John 5:39; 3 Nephi 23:1; Joshua 1:8). Excitement comes into the life of one who discovers truths in the scriptures when guided by the Spirit. If a teacher can create that same experience for the students in the classroom, then learning is magnified many times over. That which students discover for themselves is much more life-changing and useful than that which they are told by someone else. One of the easiest ways to give the students this experience is to have them look for answers in the scriptures.

There are many ways to get students to search. Invite them to look for words, phrases, lists, meanings, additional information, understanding, principles, and doctrines. Avoid yes-no responses and obvious answers. Learning *what* to have students look for and *how* to invite them to look are skills that need careful consideration. Looking for the trivial or no-brainer information will not engage the mind. There will be times when a teacher will ask students to look for simple facts, but having them look for principles of truth, for understanding, and for application is more engaging. The invitation to search works best if it is given first, *before* the scripture is read.²⁰ Students will get more out of their reading because they are looking for something and will have questions in their minds: Where is it? What is it? What does it mean? Some words that work well are “look for,” “search for,” “find,” “underline,” “mark,” and “identify.”

The clearer the invitation is, the more effective the search activity becomes. If there are several things being looked for, it helps to list the items on the board. Consider the following example: “Look for what is unusual about the money system in Alma 10–12” or “Identify how Amulek could discern Zeezrom’s thoughts in Alma 12:7.” This information is nice to know, but it is not life-changing. A more engaging approach would be: “Students, look in Alma 10:31 and find out who

was the foremost to accuse Amulek. Now look in Alma 15:12 and find out who is being baptized. Now let's look for what Alma and Amulek taught that changed Zeezrom. Using the following verses, Alma 12:25, 26, 30, 32, 33, look for what Zeezrom was taught that changed his life." Once students find the phrase "the plan of redemption," then have them look for what we learn about the plan from Alma and Amulek's teachings. This second example is more engaging because it focuses on that which is life-changing and converting. By searching this way, students can explore and discover principles of eternal significance that can be applied in their lives.

Analytical questions. Jesus knows the thoughts and intents of all our hearts, but seldom can teachers discern the thoughts of their students. When a student answers a question, a teacher can see a little better what students believe, understand, and feel. Parents, teachers, and leaders often say the youth know because they have been taught. I have been amazed when years later I find out my own children did not understand something as deeply and thoroughly as I would have hoped. Two-way communication is one of the best ways to measure student comprehension. In the classroom, this is accomplished by asking simple questions that encourage and allow students to participate. The following phrases can assist a teacher in writing analytical questions:

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| What did you find . . . ? | What does it mean . . . ? |
| Why is that . . . ? | Why do you think . . . ? |
| In your opinion . . . ? | What evidence . . . ? |
| How do you think . . . ? | What are some ways . . . ? |
| How is it that . . . ? | What differences . . . ? |

These questions are necessary to bring all to an understanding. Let us look again at Alma 11–12. After students have searched selected verses for Alma and Amulek's teaching of the plan of redemption, a teacher could ask: What did you find? What do you think that means? If the students' ideas are written on the board, the teacher can then ask: Which of those eternal truths listed on the board do you think affected Zeezrom the most? Why? Other questions could include: Why do you think Alma used the word *redemption* to describe the plan? How is it that an understanding of the plan of redemption causes change? These questions allow a teacher to see where the students are in their understanding. They help students to ponder the significance of what they are studying. Students are more able to internalize ideas as they are

thoroughly discussed and explored. Questions also give students the opportunity to share and teach.²¹ Asking this type of question requires a teacher who is willing to spend the time necessary to help all come to an understanding.

Application questions. Application questions or invitations are given to help students apply principles and doctrines in their own lives. In many classes, this invitation is not needed because the students have become so engaged and because understanding is so complete that the application happens spontaneously. If for some reason it does not, a simple question will suffice. Questions that begin with the following wording open the floodgates:

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| What have you learned . . . ? | What difference would it make . . . ? |
| When have you felt . . . ? | What do you feel/think God wants . . . ? |
| Share a time or experience . . . ? | What does the Lord expect or desire . . . ? |

Application questions give students the opportunity to explain what they have learned and what they feel God would like them to do. They help to bridge the gap between the scriptural account and their lives today. This process helps students find answers to their problems in the scriptures. It also allows them to share heartfelt feelings, which have a tremendous impact on their classmates.

Consider again Alma 10–12. Ask students, “What have you learned today that would help you come closer to the Savior?” This question personalizes the lesson. It causes students to think and take a little inventory of their personal standing before God. Other questions could be: “When have you felt that the plan of redemption caused change in your own life?” “What do you feel God wants you to do to take full advantage of the plan of redemption?” Ask the students to ponder the question or even write their response before answering. Some might be invited to share. This process of asking a question that causes them to apply the principle takes eternal truths deep into the hearts and minds of the students.

The path to student discovery. When students accept invitations to think and learn, the vault of divine knowledge is discovered and opened. Revelation is invited into hearts and minds. This can happen to the teacher during preparation and to the students and teacher during the course of the lesson. This type of teaching is very enjoyable and engaging for the teacher. Students have an edifying experience because it is so engaging and Spirit directed. It sounds rather simple and easy, and

in many ways it is. It can also be difficult and challenging. It takes work, effort, and a lot of practice! The most important aspect of utilizing questions to teach is that students learn how to discover gospel truths for themselves. In order to teach this way, the teacher needs to be guided by the Spirit. The Spirit directs the *what*: the verses and principles that are to be searched. The Spirit also directs the *how*: the questions asked, when, to whom, and how students should be asked to respond.

Thus four types of questions are used: (1) preparation questions; (2) searching questions that invite students to look for information; (3) analytical questions that cause students to think and to evaluate; and (4) application questions that allow students to liken scriptures to themselves. These four types of questions have a logical sequence that leads to discovery.

Some fear that this logic and order in teaching is confining and lacks variety. I have had many teachers report that it is uncomfortable at first. Yet, after some practice, these same teachers report that it is liberating and inspiring. No longer do they ask the question, “What will I do tomorrow?” Instead, the teacher searches the assigned reading, prayerfully selecting what he or she feel will be the most beneficial to students. The teacher then prepares the questions that cause the students to search for information, analyze that information, and make application. There are many other things that a gospel teacher will do and use in the classroom, such as visuals, stories, role-plays, lectures, and so forth. However, these fundamental questions provide a great framework to build an engaging lesson.

I have visited hundreds of classrooms, and the effect of powerful questions is incredible. To sit in a class where students are willing, excited, and engaged and where they are participating, discovering, sharing, teaching, and even testifying is almost indescribable. The thoughts that enter my mind are: “Oh, if my son or daughter could be in this class!” “I wish every young person could have this experience.” “Every seminary and institute class should be like this.” The talent of questioning is worth any effort to develop so that revelation is invited into our classrooms and into the hearts and minds of each student and teacher.

Implementation

Because teaching is so habitual, we may seem to go on automatic pilot when we stand in front of the class. Teachers practice every day, several times a day. The abilities, strengths, and talents that have been developed over the years become very evident. The teachers’ weaknesses are also easily observed. Therefore, it takes great effort, along

with a plan of action, to change and improve. These changes must be sustained over a long enough period of time that the old habits and practices are replaced. Often it is uncomfortable when a new idea is tried. Many throw their hands in the air and say, “It does not fit my personality” or “That didn’t work for me.” An appreciation and understanding of the power that habits have in our lives can give a teacher the fortitude to choose to improve and to grow and develop in acquiring new teaching skills.

How to improve. The more a person treads a path, the firmer the path becomes. One key to changing our teaching style is to prepare a lesson plan with effective questions. If a teacher cannot write a good question in the quiet of the office, there is little chance a good question will come out when the teacher is standing before a class. The process of thinking and writing facilitates improvement and change. Three well-written questions for each lesson can do wonders. In fact, the process of writing great questions can affect the logic and thinking of the teacher so profoundly that all the questions a teacher asks begin to improve.

How to teach with questions. The teacher does not just stand up and ask one question after another; the experience is one of searching, discussing, discovering, sharing, and teaching. It is very edifying. The teacher needs to decide things like: Do we discuss together as a class, in groups, in pairs, or alone? Do I tell the story or background, or have students tell, or do we discover together?

We all know that friends and peers have a powerful effect in the students’ lives. Because of this high level of peer influence, when students share responses to questions and teach each other, it is especially effective. One of the best ways to get students to share and teach each other is to ask a question and have them respond to the class, to a group, or to a partner. For example, the answers to the questions “Which part of the plan do you think affected Zeezrom the most? Why?” could be shared and discussed as a class, in small groups, or in pairs. The question could also be asked this way: “Which part of the plan do you think the youth of the Church need to understand today?” As students share their answers, they are influencing each other—they are teaching each other. President Packer taught that “a testimony is to be *found* in the *bearing* of it!”²² Because of the students’ participation, the Spirit can witness to the individual that what he or she is saying is true. It can also witness to their partner, their group, or the entire class. This causes the students to feel more deeply about what they have learned and come to believe. They *know* that they *know*, and they feel that they know. Therefore, they come to realize that they do have a testimony and that it is good.

Conclusion

Increasing student participation does have a few challenges. The manner in which student comments are received affects the success of every question that is asked. A teacher needs to have high regard for the students. The students need to feel that their comments are valued and appreciated. Likewise, a teacher cannot accept all opinions as truth but must guide the class to the proper conclusions. It takes some practice and especially a love for students to graciously receive their answers and still maintain doctrinal purity. When the Spirit is present and effective questions are being explored, they will create and draw out thoughts, ideas, and additional questions from the students. A teacher should not be too rigid but should be open to guidance so that the Spirit is directing the teaching and learning.

Consider the following from Elder Cecil O. Samuelson: “I marvel each time I consider the wonderful way in which the Prophet Joseph Smith used proper questions not only to enhance his knowledge but also to enlarge his faith. . . . The question is not whether we should ask questions but rather, What are the questions we should be asking? My experience in science and medicine leads me to believe that real progress is almost always the result of asking the right questions.”²³ My experience has also led me to believe that if we are to make real progress in taking the gospel deeper into the hearts and minds of the students, we need to be asking the “right questions,” even questions that invite revelation. If we are to fulfill the charge to “raise our sights” and have our students “become truly converted to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ while they are with us,”²⁴ we must create a climate in which the Holy Ghost can come and teach with great power and change our hearts. Great questions are vital in bringing this to pass. I know that this skill can be acquired over time, through diligent effort and practice. Just as a marvelous flood of light came forth as the Prophet Joseph Smith asked great questions, so can that much-needed light flood into the hearts and minds of gospel teachers and students everywhere as we seek the Lord’s help in improving our ability to ask questions that invite revelation. **RE**

Notes

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3. Robert D. Hales, "Teaching by Faith," address to religious educators, February 1, 2002 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002), 3.
4. *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 37.
5. See *Teaching the Gospel*, 13.
6. Hales, "Teaching by Faith," 6.
7. Gene R. Cook, *Teaching by the Spirit* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 192.
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