



Common questions about exploring the heart ...

1. Why do I need to explore the heart?
2. What am I searching for?
3. How do I explore the heart?
4. How do I respond to what I heard?
5. What if they don't share from their heart, by avoiding or staying general in their response?

Gospel **Counseling** = Gospel **Understanding** + Gospel **Proclaiming**

*Gospel Counseling is a way of loving one another by **understanding** the struggles of unbelief and lies in the midst of sin and suffering through listening to and exploring the heart, while **proclaiming** how Christ and His gospel truths apply in deeply personal and particular ways, so that we can live out the gospel by faith in community, by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.*

Gospel **Understanding** = Gospel **Listening** + Gospel **Exploring**¹

1. WHY DO I NEED TO EXPLORE THE HEART?

1A. God Searches our Hearts, Minds, and Ways

*... for the LORD searches all **hearts**, and understands every **intent** of the **thoughts** ... (1 Chron. 28:9b)*

*"I, the LORD, search the **heart**, I test the **mind**, Even to give to each man according to his **ways**, according to the results of his **deeds**" (Jer. 17:10).*

*I am He who searches the **minds** and **hearts** (Rev. 2:23b)*

*For the righteous God tries the **hearts** and **minds** (Ps. 7:9b)*

*I am He who searches the **minds** and **hearts**; and I will give to each one of you according to your **deeds** (Rev. 2:23b).*

1B. God Uses His Word to Search Our Hearts and Mind

*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the **thoughts** and **intentions** of the **heart**. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Heb. 4:12-13).*

1C. God Calls Us to Explore Our Hearts

*Search me, O God, and know my **heart**; try me and know my anxious **thoughts**; and see if there be any hurtful **way** in me and lead me in the everlasting way (Ps. 139:23-24)*

*A plan in the **heart** of a man is like deep water, but a man of understanding **draws** it out. (Prov. 20:5)*

Bottom-line: We need to explore one another's hearts so that we can understand how they reflect and rebel against the gospel.

¹ Gospel Exploring = searching and drawing out the heart, which involves asking good questions



1D. Assumptions Create Misunderstandings²

- There are two main reasons we assume too much. One is **theological** and the other is **experiential**. Let's look at the theological reason first.
- **Biblical insight** is a great gift, but it is also where we get ourselves into trouble. Knowing fundamental things about people in general should not be confused with knowing the particular individuals God has sent your way (169).
 - For example we all have parents but specifically, all of our parents are different as well as our relationship with them.
 - God not only uniquely creates each of us, he also sovereignly authors and directs each of our stories (169). **[Example]**—the process of redemption—doesn't look the same for each person. We can be quick to question one's salvation if they don't respond as we think they should.]
- The second reason we assume too much is our **experience**.
 - We speak the same language, share many of the same experiences, live in the same community, and often attend the same church, so it is easy to assume that we know more about each other than we really do.
 - More dangerous is the tendency to **confuse similar experience** with **identical experience** (170). **[Example]**—a parent's death]

1E. The Importance of Asking Good Questions³

- "Remember that people were made by God to be **interpreters**, and the **questions we ask ourselves** (sometimes almost unconsciously) **are what we use to try and make sense out of life**. The answers we give will profoundly affect the directions of our lives. So it is important to understand that **when you bring well-constructed, creative, biblically-shaped questions to a person's life, you are doing more than getting to know them and uncovering where change is needed. You are in fact, ministering to that person**" (172-173).
- When I ask you questions you would never ask yourself, **I am teaching you to view yourself through biblical lenses**. I am doing something God can use to change you in fundamental ways. Perhaps my questions will help you **see yourself more accurately**.... [good] questions will help you begin to **see how Scripture explains your life**.... [good] questions will **convict your heart and lead you to new levels of repentance**.... [good] questions will help you to **see that the Bible really does speak to the deepest issues of your experience, causing you to hunger to feed on the Word in new ways**.... In these ways, even in asking questions we can function as the Messiah's ambassadors, incarnating him before others.... **Asking good questions is doing the work of change**" (173).
- **[Example]**—you want to hear from those you're helping, "I never thought about that / that way before."]

1F. Good Questions Have Redemptive Importance⁴

- "Asking good questions is vital to helping people to face who they really are and what they are really doing" (180).
- "As sinners we all tend to recast our own history in self-serving ways. We hide behind the difficulty and pressures of the situation or the failures of others. We look for external explanations, not internal ones. We are more impressed with our righteousness than we are horrified at our sin" (181). **[Example]**—"I'm an angry person" ... "I hurt my wife."]
- "Because of this, we all need people who love us enough to ask, listen, and, having listened, to ask more. This is not being intrusive. This is helping blind people to embrace their need for Christ. It is helping people to see the foolish ways they have lived for their own glory, and the subtle ways they have exchanged worship and service of the Creator for worship and service of his creation" (181).

² Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* with page numbers noted in parentheses.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid.



1G. Good Questions Reveal ... (A summary of the Gospel Understanding Diagram)

1. Good questions reveal **how I interpret myself and my life** through three main filters:
 - a. Theological filter— I see myself through God's word
 - b. Experiential filter—I see myself through my experiences with others and significant life situations
 - c. Therapeutic filters—I see myself through labels—OCD, anxiety disorder, addict, generational predispositions
2. Good questions reveal my current **heart struggles** and **experiences**.
3. Good questions reveal both **generalities** and **particulars** in terms of my **suffering** and **sin**.
4. Good questions reveal what I believe—about God, self, others, and life in general—or to put it another way, good questions reveal my **unbelief** and my **belief in lies**.
5. Good questions reveal **how I respond** based on what I believe—respond in ways that either reflects or conflicts with the gospel.
6. Good questions reveal what **redemption** looks like in this situation—evidences of **grace** anywhere and everywhere
7. Good questions reveal what **repentance** and **faith** look like in this situation.
8. Good questions reveal what **obedience** looks like in this situation, in particular gospel **love**, **forgiveness**, and **reconciliation**.

2. WHAT AM I SEARCHING FOR?

2A. Search for what God searches for in our hearts—the evil in our hearts that results in idol worship—sinful desires, blindness, pride, hardness, unbelief—which impact our relationship with Him and others ...

*Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every **intent** of the **thoughts** of his **heart** was only **evil** continually (Gen 6:5) Beware that your **hearts** are not **deceived**, and that you do not turn away and serve other gods and worship them (Deut. 11:16)*

*"Yet they **did not obey** or incline their ear, but **walked in their own counsels** and in the **stubbornness** of their **evil heart**, and went backward and not forward (Jer. 7:24) and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not **devise evil in your hearts against one another** (Zech. 7:10) And Jesus knowing their **thoughts** said, "Why are you thinking **evil** in your **hearts**? (Matt. 9:4) For out of the **heart** come **evil** thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders (Matt. 15:9) Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an **evil, unbelieving heart** that falls away from the living God (Heb 3:12).*

2B. Search for God-changed, God-shaped hearts ... [Look for the work of the Spirit of Christ]

*Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances (Ezek. 36:26-27) the love of **God** has been poured out within our **hearts** through the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Rom. 5:5b) Because you are sons, **God** has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our **hearts**, crying, " Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6) ... May the Lord direct your **hearts** into the love of **God** and into the steadfastness of Christ (2 Thess. 3:5).*

2C. Search for how is God testing and guarding hearts ...

*For the righteous God **tries** the hearts and minds (Ps. 7:9) And the peace of **God**, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your **hearts** and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7)*

2D. Search for how they are responding to their life struggles with God and others

- Relational Dynamics ... whatever keeps us from loving Him and others
 - Relationship with God
 - Relationship with Self
 - Relationship with Others



- Heart Dynamics ...
 - **Thoughts**—interpretations— reflections— obsessions— rationale
 - **Will**—decisions— actions— commitments
 - **Affections**—emotions— desires— motives— what I treasure
 - The affections drive the will. Greater affections drive our ultimate decisions/actions. [Example, when I give in and say “yes” in my temptation to eat more than I should, my affections for food and my desire to please myself is greater than my affections for God. However, just because I say “no” to my temptation for a gluttonous portion doesn’t mean that my affections for God is primary ... my affections for body image may be ruling me.]

3. HOW DO I EXPLORE THE HEART?

3A. Entering the Person’s World ⁵

Entry Gates

- Entry gates takes us from casual relationships to redemptive relationships
- Entry gates are ...
 - Not the problem the person talks about or a particular situation or circumstance
 - Not another person or a relational issue

Recognizing Entry Gates.

“An entry gate is a particular person’s **experience** of the situation, problem, or relationship.... “What is this person **struggling with** in the midst of the situation? Or, “What has this person in its grip right now?” The entry gate is not what you think the person is struggling with; **it is the struggle the person confesses**. People will tell you how they are struggling, and their struggle will give you common ground with them and a door of opportunity into deeper level of ministry” (127).

- **Focus on the Person, Not the Problem**

- Remember, your focus should be on the person and what she is struggling with at that moment.
- As you listen for the four things listed above, look for a theme (anger, fear, guilt, hopelessness) to emerge.
- Then grab hold of that theme, meet the person in the midst of that struggle, and incarnate the loving Lord she may be unable to see. (128)

Entry Gate Questions

	God	Self	Others / Situations
Thoughts— Interpretations Reflections Obsessions Reasoning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Describe how you see God right now. What do you think he is doing? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What came into your mind as you read the note?" ▪ What are you facing now that you thought you would never face?" ▪ When you can't sleep, what thoughts keep you awake?" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What questions do you wish you could ask your husband?"
Affections— Emotions Desires Treasure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What questions do you wish you could ask God?" ▪ Do you feel hopeless?" ▪ Do you feel like God is asking you to do the impossible?" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are you feeling?" What are you afraid of right now?" ▪ Are you feeling angry? Where is that a real struggle?" ▪ What regrets do you struggle with?" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What part of the situation is getting to you most?"

⁵ Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*.



3B. Explore Wide

- Always ask open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no."
- Ask **survey** questions.⁶
 - **Survey** questions scan the various areas of a person's life and look at the person as a whole. Things that seem superficially different may actually be part of a larger theme of thought, motive, or behavior that you want to uncover. (176)
 - **Survey** questions help **uncover themes and patterns** in the person's life. (177)
- Remember that certain kinds of questions reveal certain kinds of information. (178) There are several standard types of questions:
 - **"What?"** Reveals general but significant information.
 - **"When?"** Reveals the timeline of events: past—present—future
 - **"How?"** Reveals the way something was done.
 - **"How often?"** Reveals **themes** and **patterns** in a person's life.
 - **"Where?"** Reveals context of life experiences.
 - **"Why?"** Reveals core heart struggle—purposes, desires, motivations. "Why" questions might be reserved for last since people don't generally know why they do the things they do or why they are struggling.
 - **[Example—**Asking a series of basic questions in response to a engaged couple saying, "We were fooling around."]

3C. Explore Deep

- Ask **probing** questions.⁷
 - **Probing** questions look intensively into one area of a person's life. The purpose of the focused question is to **uncover roots and causes**. (177)
 - To really get to know someone, both kinds of questions should be asked. To illustrate this point, imagine yourself at the end of a motel hallway. The hallway, with doors every several feet, represents a person's life. The rooms behind the doors represent various aspects of the person's life (job, marriage, parenting, family, spiritual life, relationship to the body of Christ, relationship to neighbors, finances, sex, communication, problem solving, goals, motives, desires, etc.). Everything you need to know about this person is in that hallway and in those rooms. As you get to know a person, you will walk down the hallway, **taking a peek in each room (survey questions)**. You will begin to notice certain themes (each room has a bed, desk, carpet, chair). **Some rooms you will enter (probing questions)**, examining the contents more closely when you see something that seems worthy of special attention. (177)
 - **[Example—**Asking probing questions about one's mother, her parents, her siblings, her as a wife/single mom, her tendencies and character, her influence and expectations, etc.]

3D. X-Ray Questions⁸

Notice that each question circles around the same basic issue: Who or what is your functional God/god? **Many of the questions simply derive from the verbs that relate you to God:** love, trust, fear, hope, seek, obey, take refuge, and the like. Each verb holds out a lamp to guide us to Him who is way, truth, and life. But each verb also may be turned into a question, holding up a mirror to show us where we stray.

- **Love:** Who or what do you love? What is your life?
- **Fear:** What or who do you fear? What makes you worry? When do you get anxious?
- **Hope:** In what do you place your hope?
- **Trust:** Where do you place your trust?
- **Seek:** What do you seek? What do you dream about?
- **Obey:** What do you struggle with?
- **Take Refuge:** Where or how do you find comfort, relief?

⁶ Adapted from Paul Tripp's *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. Tripp uses the terms "survey" and "focused" questions.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Taken from David Powlison's "X-Ray Questions."



4. HOW DO I RESPOND TO WHAT I HEARD?

“We can offer love that is personal and specific, not aimless and platitudinous. We can follow the model of the Wonderful Counselor, the Good Shepherd who goes right to where his lost sheep is, wraps in his arms, and carries him to a place of safety. Following the Lord’s example means that we communicate several things to a struggling person” (Tripp, 129):

4A. Acknowledge What You Heard⁹

- Let them know that **you** have **heard** their struggle
- Let them know that **God hears** and **understands** their struggle
- Let them know **you will journey** with them and **God will never leave them nor forsake them**
- **Don’t** respond by sharing your own experiences, by proclaiming gospel truths, by offering your favorite lines, or by making a joke out of your nervousness. You need to feel the weight of what is shared with you, to express your sorrow for their suffering, to convey the privilege it is for you to hear a portion of their heart. Bottom-line, **don’t** dishonor them after they shared in a vulnerable, honest and transparent way by your insensitivity and/or self-centeredness.

4B. Assess What You Heard

- What patterns, themes, and significant events are evident in their relationships and heart struggles?
- What are they believing—about God, self, others—based on their life experiences?
- What unbelief and lies are they struggling with in the midst of their sin and suffering?
- In what ways do their responses to their life struggles reflect the gospel? Rebels against the gospel?

4C. Ask Clarifying Questions

- “Always ask people to **define** their terms (**What?**)” (170)¹⁰ “What do you mean when you say you get depressed?”
- “Always ask people to **clarify** what they mean with concrete, real life examples of the terms they have used (**How?**)” (171).
- “Always ask people to **explain why** they responded as they did in the examples they have given you (**Why?**)” (171).

4D. Ask Progressive Questions

Ask a progressive line of questions, in which each question is based on information uncovered in the previous questions (Tripp, 180). To illustrate the importance of asking a progressive line of questions, we can use the example of a storybook that has different story lines based on what pages you turn over.

- If you follow any given story line, then you will discover a line of details. You will develop an understanding how the story develops.
- But if you go back to the page that offered the first set of options and follow the various page options, you will learn different details that will give you a more comprehensive understanding of the story.
- Real life is similar but not exactly the same as this illustration.
- As you patiently and curiously explore the various story lines of people’s lives [**Example**—see 3C] you will notice **relational patterns**—how they view **God, self, and others** and **heart patterns**—**affections**—emotions, desires, motives, what they treasure—**thoughts**—interpretations, reflections, obsessions, rationale—and **will**—decisions and responses to life and relationships.
- You should ask questions from their past, from their present, and the way they view the future. You should explore their heart from **the first** counseling session **until the last** session—you should never stop learning about who they, how they think, what they desire, and how they respond to life as you journey with them.

5. WHAT IF THEY DON’T SHARE FROM THE HEART?

- Ask the same question with different wording or from a different perspective, using illustrations or facts from their story to make a connection.
- Keep probing while explaining that you care for them and there is no condemnation in Christ.
- You may need to pull back and ask them to reflect on the particular point you are trying to explore as homework, so they have a chance to process in a reflective and prayerful manner.

⁹ Adapted from Paul Tripp’s *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*.

¹⁰ Ibid.