

The Tough Questions Discovery Process

When you are facilitating discussions of tough spiritual questions, it is helpful to understand the thought processes necessary for sorting out our beliefs. The Tough Questions series of discussion guides is designed to help people go through a five-phase process of discovery.¹ This discovery process is both non-threatening and effective to help people think through and come to conclusions. Authors Garry Poole and Judson Poling formulated the questions in this series with the intent of gently guiding participants through these five phases.

PHASE 1: IDENTIFY — WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

People are often saying what they believe for the first time in this phase.

PHASE 2: CLARIFY — WHY DO YOU BELIEVE IT?

In this phase, try to clarify what the person means. Most people have not thought much about why they believe something. As a facilitator, do not talk much during these phases; this is the opportunity for seekers to process what they believe and why.

PHASE 3: EXPLORE — HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT . . . ?

The group process becomes very important during this phase. This is where you explore the Bible and allow people to share their ideas. In the Tough Questions guides, these queries often happen around questions 5-7. They make you think!

The exploration phase is the heart of considering other options. At this time a person may trade his or her view for yours, but your view should be shared as an equal participant. Rely on God's Spirit and his Word to do the work.

PHASE 4: EVALUATE — HOW DO THESE VIEWS HOLD UP?

In this phase the group evaluates what you have just explored and individuals assess the validity of new discoveries. It is unrealistic to think people are going to change quickly. When any member, including the facilitator, does a lot of talking, people are robbed of their chance to build their belief system; we simply make them choose or reject our belief system. With that in mind, try to regulate the amount of time any one person speaks in the group, and help all of the participants express their thoughts.

PHASE 5: DECIDE — WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE NOW?

In this phase, participants are coming to new conclusions. Celebrate not only the big decisions and changes, but the smaller ones as well. Your group members are changing belief systems during each discussion.

A person can be simultaneously at different phases with different questions. For instance, a person may be in the evaluation phase about the question "How can anyone be sure God exists?" but may be in the identification phase about the question "How could God allow suffering and evil?" Understanding this will help you become more sensitive to your group members and will encourage you as you notice clear shifts in their thinking.

¹ Garry Poole, *Seeker Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 38-41.