LEADERSHIP I

WRESTLING WITH THE TRUTH
Questions to Use in Evaluating Campaigners

Is there any sport more intimate than wrestling? Is there any other sport where two people get tangled up like pretzels to the point where you can’t tell which limb belongs to whom? Is there any other sport where so much sweat from your opponent ends up slathered on your own skin? If there is, then that’s the sport we should use as a parable for Campaigners. If there’s not, then wrestling will have to do.

In Campaigners, we want kids to wrestle with the Truth. We want kids to get so tangled up with Jesus, we can’t tell whose limb belongs to whom. We want kids to walk away from Campaigners slathered with sweat from the Savior. We want them to be happily exhausted, slightly sore and smelling at least a little bit like Jesus. We want kids to have an intimate experience with Him.

Of course it’s not what we want that matters. It’s what Jesus wants. And apparently He wants His disciples to learn to wrestle. Jesus never handed His disciples truth on a silver platter. Instead He handed them shovels and asked them to dig. And though we’re mixing metaphors like milkshakes at the moment, wrestling and digging have a lot in common. They both require energy, effort and aggressive engagement to succeed.

What’s up with Jesus? Why does He want us to struggle and wrestle and dig? Why did He ask so many questions and speak in riddles and tell stories? Why didn’t He simply give us a three-point lecture and call it done?

Do you remember what Jesus said was most important? To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. That’s aggressive engagement. That’s sweaty entanglement. That’s throwing the full weight of who we are into our shovel to break the soil. Jesus is the buried treasure, after all, and He’s waiting with great expectation to be found.

What are the implications for us as we lead Campaigners? How do we promote aggressive engagement with the Truth? For starters, instead of giving easy answers, we ask skillful questions. Questions are the invitation into the wrestling ring. Questions are the shovels we hand to kids so they can dig.

Following are a few key questions to ask ourselves as we learn to ask good questions in Campaigners.

After that you’ll find a few examples of questions that invite kids to throw the full weight of who they are into digging.

1. Do kids feel safe? The goal of our discussion is to promote full engagement of the whole person with the Truth. But kids won’t step into that wrestling ring unless they believe it’s safe. Not “safe” as in “This is going to be easy,” but “safe” as in “I’m not going to be humiliated or harmed.”

Have we roped off the wrestling ring with good boundaries? Are we asking questions in a way that creates an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust? Have we clarified the ground rules for wrestling? For example: 1) There are no stupid questions; 2) What we say here stays here (unless we learn that someone is in danger of being harmed); 3) We actively listen to others with respect.

One other question regarding safety: Have we earned the right to ask questions of these kids?

2. Do kids feel successful? Part of making kids feel safe is making kids feel successful. One fleeting moment of failure can cause kids to quickly withdraw. Create questions that set kids up for success. Make kids the experts.

For example, consider this question: “What do you think Jesus meant when He said, ‘Feed my sheep?’” That question immediately makes kids the experts. Only they know what they think. They are guaranteed success. On the other hand, the question “What did Jesus mean when He said, ‘Feed my sheep?’” is less inviting. It appears that the leader is looking for a specific answer. Kids run the risk of failing if they don’t find it. For many kids, that’s a risk they aren’t willing to take in front of their friends.

If, however, a question asks for a specific answer that is clear on the page in front of our face, kids can still be set up for success. For example, “Who was Jesus talking to when He said, ‘Feed my sheep?’” asks for a specific answer, but it’s an answer that kids can successfully find.
3. Do kids feel included? Not every kid will have access to the same vocabulary, experience or background to answer every question. For example, not every kid can answer, “What was it like to grow up in a loving family?” And not every kid can answer, “What does the Old Testament say about sacrifice?” It’s important that we understand our audience well enough to form questions that are accessible to all. Well-placed questions are always within reach, but they invite us to reach “up” to find the answer.

4. Are my questions clear? Ask one question at a time. Compound questions create confusion. Also, avoid using words that require a dictionary or a commentary for your audience to understand. Finally, before we can be clear with kids, we have to be clear with ourselves. What is the purpose of our question? What do we really mean to ask? Make a list of questions in advance and practice asking them out loud. It takes practice to ask clear questions. It’s easier to ask complicated and confusing questions than questions that are clear and simple.

5. Are my questions fair? It’s not fair to ask, “Don’t you think ...?” That’s called leading the witness. It’s also not fair to ask, “How are you like the Rich Young Ruler?” That’s assuming kids are like the Rich Young Ruler. Unfair questions put kids on the spot, in a box or back kids into a corner. Unfair questions make kids want to cry, “Unfair!”

6. Are my questions stimulating or stifling discussion? Ask open-ended questions that invite at least one sentence for an answer. Avoid yes/no questions, as a rule. Also, ask clarifying and follow-up questions to keep the conversation flowing. Say, “Tell me more,” or, “Elaborate on that.” Ask kids who are conspicuously quiet what they’re thinking. Ask kids in the group to comment or respond to what their friends are saying. As leaders, we want the discussion to look more like a game of pinball than a game of ping-pong. We want conversation bouncing off of everyone in the room, not just a back and forth between us and a few kids. We want all kids fully engaged with the Truth and with one another. It’s a lofty goal, but one that is deeply gratifying in the moments that we reach it. Those are magical moments where kids can be transformed.

7. Are my questions inviting the whole person into the wrestling ring, or just an arm or a leg? As we said in the beginning, the goal of our discussion is to promote full engagement of the whole person with the Truth. There are at least five aspects of the “whole person” to consider when asking questions. Engage the senses; engage the mind; engage the emotions; engage the needs and wants; engage the actions. For example, from John 13: Engage the senses: What do you think the disciples’ feet smelled like as Jesus washed them? What do you think their feet looked like?

Engage the mind: Where was Jesus? Who was with Him? What did Jesus know, according to verse one? Why do you think the author thought it was important to include that piece of information? What difference do you think it makes for the rest of the story? According to verse one, what was Jesus showing His disciples? If you were writing the dictionary, according to this story, how would you define the word “love”? How is verse three related to verse four? What are a few words you would use to describe Jesus, according to verse three?

Engage the feelings: What feelings do you sense rising up in Peter in verse 8? Have you ever received a gift you thought you didn’t deserve? What did it feel like? How does it make you feel to realize that Jesus is asking us to lower ourselves and become servants to others?

Engage the needs and wants: Our feet get dirty simply walking through life day to day. Have you stepped in anything unpleasant lately? Is there something you need Jesus to wash from your feet? After reading this passage, is there anything you want to do? Anything you want to have? Anything you want to be?

Engage the actions: What is one thing you could do this week to “wash someone’s feet”?

Karen Lee-Thorp, in her booklet, “How to Ask Great Questions,” identifies at least five kinds of questions that help engage the whole person with the Truth. Those questions are:

1. Story-telling questions. Story-telling questions build trust and goodwill in a group by inviting us to share some of our own personal experience — past, present or future. The safest story-telling questions invite us to share something from the
past. Talking about the present takes a bit more courage. Sharing our hopes, dreams or fears for the future requires tried-and-true trust. Good story-telling questions help prepare the group for the Scripture we are going to explore together by leading the way. As Thorp says, “The full resources of the group will not become available until all members believe it is safe to offer themselves.”

2. **Fact-finding questions.** Fact-finding questions draw our eyes to important details of a passage. Too many fact-finding questions can make a discussion seem simplistic. But a few thoughtfully-crafted questions can make a flat story on a page become 3-D. Fact-finding questions ask for just the facts that can be found by looking at the words in the passage. For example, “Who are the main characters in this passage?” or “How many times did Jesus say to Peter, ‘Feed my sheep’?”

3. **Interpretation questions.** Interpretation questions invite us to explore the meaning of a word, phrase or passage. Interpretation questions ask variations of: What does it mean? How is it significant? What’s the point? What’s the cause? The result? The connection? How are these things alike? How are they different?

4. **Feeling questions.** Feelings are like flashlights that illuminate our thinking. If we can help kids identify their feelings, then maybe we can shed some light on the thoughts behind those feelings. Feelings are also like fuel that drives our engines. If we can help kids tap into their feelings, they might be able to harness that energy to follow Jesus. Either way, feelings are an important part of the whole person. Feeling questions help engage that part of the whole person with Jesus.

This might seem self-evident, but the words, “I feel” are meant to be followed by a feeling. For example, “I feel frustrated.” Or, “I feel perplexed.” To say, “I feel Jesus is being unreasonable in this passage,” is a misguided statement. The person means, “I THINK Jesus is being unreasonable in this passage.” The phrase “Jesus is being unreasonable” is not a feeling. Maybe the person means, “I feel angry with Jesus for saying what He said.”

Likewise, the question, “What do you feel Jesus meant in this passage?” is a misguided question. The leader is actually asking, “What do you THINK Jesus meant?” It’s a small thing, but keeping our feelings separated from our thoughts maintains integrity and paves the way for full engagement with the Truth.

5. **Application questions.** Application questions ask “So what?” and “Now what?” “So what?” questions ask for a theoretical, general application of what we’re learning from a passage. “Now what?” questions ask for specific, personal application. Thorp makes a good point: “Instinct tells me that people who are asked to take drastic action too often and in too many different directions eventually go numb in order to survive.” As a result, Thorp asks “So what?” questions regularly and systematically and asks “Now what?” questions sparingly and with clear focus.

A good, personal application question — the “Now what?” kind — is specific, doable and measurable. For example, “After reading this passage, what is one thing you could do this week to wash the feet of another person?” Best case scenario, the next time the group meets, members report back about the “Now what?” from the week before.

If you’re still reading this article, then something has become increasingly clear. It’s not just the kids who are going to walk away from Campaigners happily exhausted, slightly sore and smelling a bit like Jesus. Before we can invite kids into the wrestling ring, we have to take to the mat first. Sure, we could print out a ready-made Bible study from the Internet or compose a quick “lesson” on a napkin at McDonald’s, but where’s the fun in that? Jesus wants to swap sweat with us. He’s inviting us to become intimately entangled with the Truth. He’s inviting us to dig for buried treasure. And He’s waiting with eager expectation to be found.