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## Asking Tough Questions: What Really Happens When We Train Leaders

Craig Parro

**E**very year, a dizzying array of non-formal leadership training programs are offered worldwide. Each includes a slightly different approach.

- Some use Western trainers with local interpreters, while others utilize national trainers, and still others rely on residential missionaries.
- Some focus on standardized, programmatic instruction, while others are less structured.
- Some seek to replicate a full Bible institute curriculum, while others are more targeted, focusing on a particular area of ministry and/or personal development.
- Some are one-time conferences or seminars, while others are ongoing, longitudinal efforts.
- Some depend heavily on technological resources, while others rely primarily on either human or printed resources.
- Some invest heavily in training trainers, others less so.
- Some have strong institutional connections (e.g., Bible school extension programs), while others are

denomination-based, local church-based, or mission or agency-based.

What are we to make of this plethora of training approaches and efforts? On one hand, we rejoice that the Lord has raised up so many to meet the urgent need for church leadership development. Martin Luther saw equipped pastors as the key to church health and growth, saying, "I entertain no sorry picture of our Church, but rather that of the Church flourishing through pure and uncorrupted teaching and one increasing with excellent ministers from day to day."

On the other hand, one wonders, *What are we accomplishing?* Although a few training programs have clearly defined goals and measurable outcomes, many do not. Assessment and evaluation of non-formal leadership training tends to be sporadic at best.

At the first TOPIC (Trainers of Pastors International Coalition) consultation (Wheaton, 1997), theological educator and pastoral leader Dr. Mark Young questioned the efficacy of seminar/conference ministries in Eastern Europe. He suggested that perhaps our non-formal seminars are not as effective as we hope, asking, "Are we confusing response with results?" Realistically, response (immediate and typically overwhelmingly favorable reactions to our ministries) may be far different from results (the long-lasting fruit).

Our ministry, Leadership Resources International, equips and encourages pastors around the world to teach God's word with God's heart. We seek to discover what's happening as a result of our ministry—be it good or bad—and have built re-

search and evaluation into the fabric of what we do. Our commitment to self-assessment has both a personal as well as a theological grounding.

### The Question Guy

My earliest memory etched itself into my 3-year-old brain as I sat on a stoop outside our apartment building on the south side of Chicago. As a young toddler stopped in front of me, I asked him, "Will you be my friend?" My first memory centered on a question—and a pretty good one at that!

A few years later I remember asking my second question. As I walked home from first grade with Helen, I stopped and asked her, "Helen, when we grow up, will you marry me?" I'm not sure what came over me. Helen wisely suggested that we wait to see what happens.

I eventually became a professional question guy, working at a survey research company for fifteen years, helping clients launch new products by asking tough questions.

Have you noticed how important questions are in life? Think about how many questions you have asked today: *When's breakfast? Who's speaking? Is so and so here? When's lunch? Where did I put my notes?* Some are of little significance, while others carry enormous weight: *What did the doctor say? Will she ever forgive me? How long does he have to live?* Questions are an essential part of life.

### The Lord of Questions

Have you noticed how often Jesus asked questions? He asked ninety-nine questions in the Gospel of Matthew alone. Scripture suggests at

least two major reasons:

1. Jesus, as a master teacher, knew that questions were a compelling teaching method. They force people to grapple with issues, moving them from passive listeners to active learners.

2. By asking questions, Jesus learned what the Father was doing.

Jesus' ministry strategy was to watch for what the Father was doing. He only said and did what he heard and saw the Father doing (see John 5:19; 8:28). This was Jesus' "philosophy of ministry." He looked to see where and how the Father was leading. The Father was the initiator, the Son was the responder.

Think about the remarkable words Jesus spoke on the cross: "It is finished" (John 19:30). How could he say that? For every blind man he healed, there were ten more still groping in the dark. For every disciple who followed him, there were thousands who did not. The answer is found in Jesus' high priestly prayer: "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4).

How did Jesus learn what the Father was doing and what the Father was calling him to do? Three points:

**1. Prayer.** Jesus spent extended time praying, especially when faced with major decisions and before and after momentous events.

**2. Reading, studying, and memorizing scripture.** Here is where he often heard what the Father was saying.

**3. Observing.** Jesus spent time watching people and responding to opportunities the Father brought into his life.

There was one other way he discerned what the Father was doing: he asked poignant questions.

## The Turning Point

Matthew 16 represents a pivotal time in Jesus' ministry. Jesus poured his life into the disciples for three years, seemingly to no avail. He was perplexed by the density of the disciples' hearts and minds. We hear Jesus' exasperation expressed in Matthew 15:16: "Are you still so dull?" He fires question after question at his bewildered disciples: "You of little faith, why are you talking about...bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember...? How is it that you don't understand...?" (Matt. 16:8-10). They still didn't get it. Perhaps he was wondering if they would ever get it.

Jesus was watching to see what the Father was doing. It must have seemed as though the Father was not working in the lives of the disciples. Yet, Jesus knew it was not a matter of *if*, but *when*. When would the three years of discipling begin to bear fruit? When would his teaching and healing ministry be completed and his ministry of suffering and death begin? Jesus depended upon the Father's timing.

In Matthew 16, Jesus traveled with his disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi, northeast of Galilee. He began a little research project by asking the disciples, "Who do the people say that I am?" (16:13). His disciples responded, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (16:14). These comparisons, though likely meant as words of encouragement, were far off the mark. The people still didn't know who Jesus was.

Jesus followed up (16:15-16) with two questions that penetrated to the core: "But what about you? Who do

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

What is God doing in and through your ministry?

What fruit is he producing through you?

How do you evaluate your own teaching and training efforts?

How do you discern what the Lord is doing?

What questions should you be asking?

## Practical Helps to Ask Tough Questions

The "15 Best Evaluation Practices," written specifically for those engaged in pastoral training, can be found at [www.leadershipresources.org/best-practices](http://www.leadershipresources.org/best-practices). This paper summarizes a Best Practices Summit sponsored by Leadership Resources. The roundtable focused on the best research and evaluation practices for trainers of pastors.

Jane Vella, a leading authority on adult education, developed and tested many of her ideas while working in Tanzania. Her book, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, is a classic in the field. She has also co-authored *How Do They Know They Know*, which offers a step-by-step approach to evaluating adult training programs.

you say I am?" Simon Peter responded with the famous affirmation, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus discovered that the Father was working in his disciples after all. After Peter responded with "the right answer," Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (16:17). By asking a series of questions, Jesus saw more clearly that the Father had been creating understanding and faith in the minds and hearts of the disciples after all.

The implications of this discovery were enormous, for it marked the be-

ginning of the end. Jesus was always looking for the Father's time:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (16:21)

Luke simply says, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). The disciples finally understood. It was time for Jesus to head to Jerusalem and the cross.

Through a series of thoughtful

questions, Jesus discovered what the Father was doing and what he, as the Father's Son, should do in response to his Father's activity.

### **The BIG Question: What Is God Doing?**

We see the early Church asking the same question. The Church in Jerusalem heard rumors about what was happening in Antioch and wondered, "What's God up to?" So they sent a researcher named Barnabas. Another researcher, Luke, records that, "When he arrived and saw the *evidence of the grace of God*, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts" (Acts: 11:23, emphasis mine).

What were these "evidences" that Barnabas was able to see? There was something tangible and observable about God at work at Antioch. The Church there was not only bearing fruit that would remain, but also fruit that could be seen.

Barnabas then asked himself the important follow-up question: *Given what the Father is doing, what should I be doing?* Barnabas saw exciting church growth in Antioch, but he also saw needs, especially the need for solid teaching of scripture to establish the disciples and develop leaders.

We know that Barnabas saw large numbers of new believers. Church growth is surely an "evidence of the grace of God." I've often thought that church planters have it easier than pastor-trainers and leader-developers in that their "success" is more easily measured. Conversions, baptisms, church membership, and new church plants are all quantifiable. On the other hand, measuring spiri-

tual growth and the development of leadership qualities and preaching and teaching skills is more complicated (but no less important).

Barnabas saw what the Father was doing, but also what the Father had left undone. Barnabas responded by going to Tarsus and finding Saul: "So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people" (Acts 11:26). In response to what they saw (and didn't see) in Antioch, Barnabas and Saul equipped and encouraged a team of pastoral leaders from Africa, Asia, and Europe (Acts 13:1). This set the stage for the first sustained missionary effort of the New Testament Church.

### **Seeing but the Outer Fringes**

*How is God using us?* is a perplexing question that's difficult to answer. Barnabas saw the evidences of God at work. He didn't see everything God was doing, but he saw enough to recognize God's handiwork.

The combination of God's vastness and our smallness prevent us from clearly seeing what God is doing. If indeed God's activity is infinite and Jesus is "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:3) and the Father "is always at work" (John 5:17), then we should not be surprised by our inability to grasp the works and wonders of God.

The Father has chosen to reveal only a small portion of what he is doing. Job describes the unfathomable workings of God in the heavens and on the earth, in both the skies and the seas, and concludes, "And these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the

thunder of his power?" (Job 26:14).

Think of all our human limitations which hamper our ability to discern his ways. We are locked into the here and now. We are embodied creatures, rooted in and oriented toward the physical dimensions of life. Our "bentness" toward sin and self-centeredness impede us from clearly seeing all that God is doing. We simply don't have the capacity to fully comprehend his works. But every so often he graciously lifts the veil to show us some of what he is doing.

Following are some practical suggestions to help you discern what the Father is doing in and through your ministry. We've also developed the Leadership Resources' Program Design Grid (see page 32) to help you establish clear goals and appropriate ways to evaluate what's really happening. Although designed for pastor-trainers, it can easily be adapted for other cross-cultural ministries.

### **Three Questions to Help Us Discern What God Is Doing**

As you think about a specific area of ministry, ask the following questions.

**What do I hope to see happen?** This is a question of intentionality. Too often, we undertake ministry without a clear sense of the specific results for which we are aiming. Have we defined our goals and intended outcomes? For example, think about an upcoming pastor training course. What is the "So what?" for which you are aiming? As you prepare, ask: *How specifically do I want pastors to respond to these lessons? What impact do I want to see in their walk with God, in their relationships, in their heart for ministry,*

*in their ministry competencies? What long-term changes do I hope to see?*

Here's another way of thinking about it: *If the Lord were to answer all of your prayers for this training course, what would happen? What would it look like in the lives of the individuals you are equipping, in their churches, in their communities...next month, next year, ten years from now?*

**Are these things actually happening?** This is a question of impact. Too often, we assume transformation in leaders we are equipping, without really knowing. *Did the things you were praying for and working towards happen? How do you know? What are the indicators, the "evidences of the grace of God," that you see? What did you see God do (and not do)?* This question begs for both humility and honesty.

**What should I do differently in the future?** This is a question of learning. God desires to transform others through us, but he's just as committed to transforming you and me in the process. Every ministry opportunity is a chance for us to grow, get sharper, and become more effective. After every pastoral training event, I encourage our team to first rejoice in what the Lord accomplished and then ask, *What did I learn? What worked? What didn't work so well? What needs to change so that I can be even more effective next time?* These questions likewise call for humility and honesty.

These three subordinate questions serve the first question: *What is God doing?* We should set goals, but only those that flow out of what we see the Father doing. God's goals are far more precious than our own. Ecclesiastes 3:14 reminds us, "I know

## Leadership Resources Program Design Grid

Program Design Grid	Specific Changes	How Will You Know?
Identifies clear outcomes and appropriate ways to evaluate	In what important ways do you hope the teaching will shape the pastors' Character? → → → → → Knowledge? → → → → → Relationships? → → → → → Skills? → → → → → → → → → Spiritual Walk? → → → → →	Discover how the pastors actually changed. How did the teaching impact... Their heart, passions, values, attitudes, and actions What they know and believe How they love, lead, and serve What they can do Vitality of their relationship with God
<b>Short-term Learning Goals</b> What do you want them to learn? Think in terms of immediate and specific learning that you hope will take place <b>during</b> your teaching.		
<b>Long-term Change/Impact Goals</b> What changes in their lives and ministries do you hope will occur <b>after</b> your teaching, over the next months and years? How should these changes impact their ministries, churches, and communities?		

that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken away from it. God does it so men will revere him."

Only what the Father does will last. Like Jesus and Barnabas, we are to do what we see the Father doing, we are to speak the words we hear our Father

speaking, and we are to align ourselves with his providential purposes.

### Conclusion

Asking tough questions is essential for effective ministry. Learn to ask them. What kinds of changes are really happening in the lives of those we teach and serve? What kinds of changes should we consider in terms of content, technique, focus, skills, and so on? Surely our ministry efforts will have greater impact, as we become (1) more reflective, asking the hard, poignant questions; (2) more intentional, asking what we are really trying to accomplish; (3) more informed, asking how we know what we are accomplishing; and (4) more flexible, asking how we need to change in order to improve our ministry.



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