



TEST OR DISCUSSION GROUPWORDS

Don't give a test, lead a discussion.

Imagine a Small Group leader asking a group for their opinions. Imagine the people giving their various answers. And then, imagine the group leader reacting to their opinions by saying, "No ... *that's not what I'm looking for ... any other thoughts?*" How many "other thoughts" do you think would be offered? Not many.

In case you are wondering, I didn't make this scenario up. I actually saw a discussion leader ask a question, receive an answer and then say, "No ... *that's not what I'm looking for.*" He continued to give this response to several answers and the group got quieter and quieter. In fact, only those with the courage to guess what he was "looking for" continued to respond until, finally, we all stopped. He then gave us the "correct" answer and asked his next question. Of course, by that time it was clear to us that these were not discussion questions, but test questions.

In school we took tests. Questions were asked and we were required to give the "right" answers. It was a natural part of our education. Math, science, grammar, languages, they all measured our progress through test questions. This works fine in junior high math. It's a great help in measuring how much information has been memorized in Spanish class. And yes, even our Biblical knowledge can be measured in this way. But in a Small Group, turning our discussion questions into test questions usually shuts down the whole discussion.

Tests can make people defensive. They are afraid they will give the "wrong" answer. They are afraid they will look foolish. And so, they become silent. How different is a relaxed, open environment in which people feel encouraged to explore, to think out loud, to share opinions, doubts and even confusion. This kind of atmosphere encourages people to think about new ideas, to inspect their own lives, and even consider changes in their life-style.

Tests also imply a hierarchy. The leader has the "right" answers and therefore is superior to the others. But a group designed for spiritual growth needs a safe setting and an atmosphere of mutual respect. Test questions disguised as discussion questions are not respectful. Group members feel lured out into the open and then reprimanded for giving the "wrong" answer.

And so, in addition to the factual questions from the text, be sure to also ask for information group members have but the leader may not have (for example):

- ✓ *What do you think? (Only they know their thoughts.)*
- ✓ *What emotions or actions does Jesus' statement trigger in you?*
- ✓ *With which character do you most identify in this story?*
- ✓ *What lessons do you see in this story?*

In all of these cases, the discussion leader is looking for something they genuinely do not know. And they are asking, not to pass or fail the "student" but because they truly want to know the heart of their fellow group member.