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TWO PRACTICAL QUESTIONS

1. *What is the value of the new translation in a Bible study group? If some have AV and some NEB, will that be a good or a bad mixture? If all have NEB, what will be missed?*

The value of the new translation in a Bible study group will be very great. Fresh nuances are brought out in many places which the older versions miss. One example comes to mind: the statement in John iv. 9 that 'the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans' (AV), while generally true, is not specific enough. The meaning of the Greek is expressed more adequately by the NEB: 'Jews and Samaritans, it should be noted, do not use vessels in common.'

On the other hand, certain precise details of vocabulary may be overlooked if no other version than the NEB is available, because of the translators' policy of making the sentence rather than the individual word the main unit of translation. It will be all to the good if the AV is available too, and not only the AV but the RSV too and (from some points of view best of all) the RV. Where the members of the group do not have access to the Greek text, a comparison of different versions is a stimulating and healthy exercise; it provokes questions and brings points to light which might otherwise be overlooked.

2. *With the strong emphasis on modern English paraphrase, how much easier (or more difficult) will it be to do theological word-study or doctrine-study privately than it was with the AV, or more particularly with the RV?*

For reasons which have already been suggested, private study of this kind, and especially where the study of individual words is concerned, will be much more satisfactorily pursued with the RV than with the NEB. The RV text lent itself admirably to be the basis of so helpful a work as W. E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*; the compilation of such a students' handbook would be difficult, if not impossible, on the basis of the NEB. The great value of the NEB lies in its superb quality as a version for the general reader.

THE HAZARDS OF RUNNING A BIBLE DISCUSSION GROUP¹

By H. F. R. CATHERWOOD

AFTER about five years of running a weekly discussion group, there is little doubt in my mind that the hazards of this occupation are a good deal greater than those in other forms of Christian work. On the other hand, I am certain that I have, personally, learnt as much in discussion as in any other form of Christian study or teaching. Most of us are lazy in learning. We listen to an address or read an article and think that we remember what we hear. But if ever we test ourselves afterwards, we usually find that we have remembered little. Most people's minds need to be stimulated and their interest and curiosity aroused. Give us straight doctrine and we may find it dull, but pose a question and we all want to know the answer. This is the method of the best speakers and writers, but even they lack the one great benefit of discussion, which is participation. Teachers tell us that we remember best the points we make ourselves — or the points we would have made if someone else had not spoken first!

¹ Reprinted, with kind permission, from *The Witness* of March 1961.

FOUNDATIONS FOR GOOD DISCUSSION

I regard a discussion group as being the final layer of instruction in a well instructed community. It functions best, not in isolation, but as complementary to sound teaching Sunday by Sunday in the ordinary course of worship. Discussion needs a background of knowledge. It also needs a common denominator of agreement among the majority of the participants, otherwise every argument tends to drift back into a dispute on first principles. While a discussion group can have a minority who are not Christians or who are weak in the faith, the majority should be firm Christians. The basic principles are not a matter for discussion, they must be accepted by faith. If, for instance, the authority of the Bible is questioned in discussion, the leader should say that the discussion is based on acceptance of this authority and that it cannot be treated as a matter in dispute. On the other hand if a group, already accepting the authority of the Bible, want to discuss the basis of its authority more fully, they should be able to do so without difficulty. A discussion group does best if it does not try to usurp the function of the evangelist or of the preacher.

VERBAL EXACTNESS VERSUS SPIRITUAL MEANING

It is essential that a group should be clear from the start what sort of conclusions they are trying to reach. In studying a passage from the Bible, some people seem to think that their objective is achieved when they have decided on the best English rendering. They are experts in Greek and Hebrew and are seldom satisfied with the Authorized or Revised Versions. The leader has to remind them firmly that this is not a class in Greek or Hebrew or on the meaning of words. A decision as to the true meaning of the words is only a means to an end and, when in difficulty, a wise leader short-circuits the discussion by rapid reference to a good Bible commentary. It is my own belief that in the great majority of cases the sense is perfectly evident from the Authorized or Revised Versions. I would suggest that the proper object in any study of the Bible is to find the spiritual message of the passage under study and to decide on its practical application. I do not believe that there is any passage of Scripture without a spiritual message or a practical application.

THE LEADER HIMSELF

The greatest hazard for the leader is that he never knows what turn the discussion may take next and for this reason the range of his preparation must be very wide. A leader who is not sure of his ground will be tempted to turn the discussion off the point in question and back to ground which is more familiar to him personally. One of the benefits of discussion is that teaching can be directed to subjects with which people are really concerned and their particular difficulties can be aired. While the leader should never lose sight of the agreed subject and the ultimate goal, I would suggest that he should be reasonably generous in allowing discussion to stray slightly on the way, to cover points which seem to be of general concern. If passages of the Bible are discussed, I am sure that the leader's best preparation is to study more than one commentator on the passage and its context. One commentator alone is probably not enough, because each has his idiosyncrasies and prejudices. A comparison of three or four will bring out the most important points in the passage and, if there is a controversial point, it is likely that between them they will put the differing views.

COMMENTARIES

One of the outstanding commentators, in my view, is John Calvin, the father of all commentators and the fountain-head of many of them. His greatest virtue is that he never shirks a difficult issue. He is logical and lucid and

deals more fully with an individual verse than most modern commentators. Although the cost of all 45 volumes is probably prohibitive, it may well be worth investing £10 in the 8 volumes on the Epistles (published by Eerdmans). One of the best single-volume commentaries is by Jamieson Fausset and Brown (published by Oliphants) and there is a good commentary by Alford on the New Testament (published by the Moody Press). It can also be useful to have a general book on doctrine for reference, such as Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth). It is important that the leader should not name the commentators as authorities in the course of discussion. This leads to a bandying about of one authority against another and gets nowhere. I have gone into some detail on preparation by the leader because it is the key to good discussion.

TACTICS IN LEADERSHIP

There is quite a technique in leading a discussion, as those of us who have tried it have learnt through the painful process of trial and error. It is essential to keep the meeting cheerful and to get people to 'jolly' one another out of perverse ideas, rather than to lecture one another. There is sometimes rather a fine line between good humour and irreverence, but I think that there are fewer risks in that direction than in allowing heat to arise through people taking themselves too seriously. A sense of humour is a sense of proportion.

Although many may disagree, I think that a good leader must be a strong leader. To be a chairman is not enough. Most discussions need a positive stimulus to get them going. The talkative need to be kept short, the retiring need to be brought out. If one side is making heavy weather, the leader may need to encourage them, even to help them to state their case. If a younger member, putting forward a foolish view, comes under severe cross-questioning by others, the leader may have to take over and put the questions more gently. If an able member puts forward erroneous views, the leader must see that those views are made to appear erroneous and if no-one can be found to stand up to the able member he must, as a last resort, do so himself. If the body of the meeting are agreed on a point, but some members are not, then, in order to avoid repetitive argument he must get the meeting to 'take a view' and pass on. Christians often have right beliefs without really knowing why. Instead of accepting a statement of a sound doctrine without comment, it is sometimes useful for the leader to put and argue a plausible, but erroneous view, to stimulate the meeting to thought, so that they do not take the correct position for granted. One of the objects of discussion is to make people think their position through. Indeed the necessity for thought is perhaps one reason why discussions are less popular than straight addresses! Finally, strong leadership is necessary to hold a meeting on its course and bring it to correct conclusions.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATING

There are various techniques which can be used to hold a discussion together. Those who give views should be made to back them up from the Bible and to give, with the help of the meeting, chapter and verse for their quotations. A quotation from the New Testament is usually more explicit than one from the Old, and two passages are better than one standing in isolation. It is surprising what a fund of memory can be tapped by a whole meeting. The most reticent members are often the best at finding the right quotation. The leader must make up his mind on the conclusion to which he wants to lead the meeting and, if possible, on the stages through which the conclusion will be reached. These will be the hidden landmarks which

will enable him to keep the meeting from going too far off course. If the meeting does not find its own way, he should drop hints, large enough to be suggestive, but small enough to keep them thinking. The leader's conclusions may sometimes be wrong but if he goes through the exercise of forming his conclusion, he is likely to get a better meeting even if he has to change his views half-way through. It is not necessary to crush everyone who makes an irrelevant point. If the point is good in itself, the leader can say so, but should then pass on to other people, stopping only with someone who makes a point that is relevant and then ensuring that that point is fully developed. It is sometimes useful to have a good-natured person, well known to the leader, who does not mind having his views held up to gentle mockery. His usefulness lies in the probability that he is putting forward ideas which are held by a number of others, who might be offended if they were subjected to the same treatment, but who will nevertheless be convinced by the argument.

A good Christian community is often a haven to those who are mentally weak and unstable and these people often find their way into discussion groups. Whatever they do, the leader must remain unruffled. So long as he is calm and appears to have the situation under control the meeting will be unworried and the disturber may well be overawed. A combination of courteous but firm reasonableness is usually enough.

THE SUBJECT FOR DISCUSSION

It seems to me that the New Testament is more suitable for discussion than the Old. This is because I feel that the Old Testament deals with doctrine in large sweeps, in images and types, while the New deals with it in direct and manageable statements. Doctrine and injunction are more suitable for discussion than history and prophecy. I think that it is better to deal with two or three verses at a time rather than to spend too long on one verse, and I have also found it useful once a month, in a weekly series, to have an 'open session' on a general subject chosen by the meeting. We have chosen such subjects as 'The Christian use of Sunday and the Christian attitude to the world's use of Sunday', 'The Christian's duty as an employee', 'Should the Church play a part in the social life of its members?', 'Is revelation final or progressive?', 'Has the moral law a function in the world?', 'The nature and extent of the Christian's knowledge of God', 'The value, if any, of Christian apologetics', 'The value, if any, of Christian tradition', 'The relation of the individual Christian to the Church', 'Are white lies ever justified?', and 'Where does study for professional qualifications give way to time for Bible study and Christian work?'. Perhaps we have not always reached the right answers but I hope that we have all learnt how to tackle a question, how to deduce sound doctrine from the statements of Scripture and how to apply that doctrine to daily life. It may have been hard work but perhaps for a dozen or so young people, and certainly for their leader, it has not been dull.

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