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B I B L E S T U D Y G R O U P S

in the Home

by J. M. Houston

World events seem to indicate that Christianity is entering a period of great peril. Its relevance is being questioned more freely than ever before. If we Christians do not face up realistically to the immediate challenges of our age, we may well find ourselves shunted into an anachronistic situation. Increasingly, Christian testimony must demonstrate its qualities of life, and not merely its quantitative influences of public expression, widespread evangelism, Bible translations, denominational membership, church meetings, etc. Secularism has driven great rifts between knowledge and morals, enabling man to escape the need of committal to a line of action. And it is when Christians indulge in much talk and show lack of personal devotion to principles, that they too exhibit secularism. We may rightly suspect the emphasis of some on orthodoxy and right belief as matters to be held for their own sake, instead of expressing a living, dynamic faith relevant for all aspects of life. The importance of home-based Christianity is thus vital, far more so than the nominal attendance at places of public worship. For if we rely essentially on public worship for our faith, instead of making it the expression of our private devotion to God, it will sooner or later become barren and empty.

Perils Confronting Christian Fellowship

The loving relationships men and women show each other in a local church are the normative way God uses through His Spirit to testify of His grace. 'See how those Christians love one another', is not just an estimable sentiment; it should be the mark of all Christian communities. We need therefore to beware of the worldly temptation to define Christian fellowship in terms of social acceptability. Snobbery and status-seeking are not merely harmless indulgences. They reflect self-centred anxiety and the modern tyranny of success. Not only do they disrupt Christian fellowship; they breed infectiously. Even more difficult sometimes to overcome is inverted snobbery, when resentment, envy, and inferiority complexes destroy genuine fellowship.

Another peril to Christian fellowship is the fostering of the local church as an in-group. That is to say a group that is so conservative in its attitude to outsiders, so established as a huddle, so preoccupied with its own club life, that the stranger is not genuinely welcomed for his own sake, and no effective outreach is made in the neighbourhood. The attachment of

such a group to confessional principles is usually due far more to traditional loyalty than to immediate, personal experience. Its theological position is in fact much more a rationalisation of unconscious motives of fear and self-preservation, than evidence of dynamic principles of faith. This is today, I believe, the greatest peril that faces many of our assemblies.

A third danger lies in the fragmentation of our lives. We need to emphasise far more than we do a coherent view of life. Whenever we fear what other people think of us, or are directed more by social acceptability than by personal integrity, then we tend to fragment our own personalities. The abuse of jargon in theological discourse, the undue attachment to public meetings as against private devotions, the endless discourses on theology for their own sake, the priority given to the platform as *the* Christian ministry, all tend to make our Christianity an artificial segment of daily life. In the so-called secular content of our life, we do not think Christianly. No wonder many Christians are quite inarticulate to communicate the experience of the in-dwelling Christ to their non-Christian colleagues and neighbours.

There is in consequence much personal sickness. Much mental pain and psychological suffering is today being quite untouched by our church life. Some of us are insensitive to such a need, for sensitivity to the needs of others is not universally developed. Personal problems are often deeply mysterious, and we feel baffled, if not frightened to intervene. They involve much love, much patience, much time. Yet unless we face up to the neuroses of modern life, we may well find their need makes our superficial concepts of Christian fellowship a shallow, irrelevant affair of mere appearances. Modern man often finds himself a mere unit in an impersonal crowd. We dwell in the midst of homogenized products, of faceless society, of masks that pass for persons. Yet we deny the very authenticity of our faith if we do not resist these principalities and powers of modern life. For where else do we find more profound meaning given to personal relations and to the morality of the personality than in Christianity? Nowhere else is there provided such a framework of common shared experience of love. Nowhere else is there such a power for coping with the daily problems of life.

The Therapy of Small Groups

If then our churches are not meeting all the needs of modern life, we must be prepared to consider what else is needed. The tragic dilemma of the history of Christianity seems to be that its very success in attracting large numbers suffocates it. It is a well known feature of large churches that personal values tend to be destroyed, personal initiative, devotedness, service tend to be diminished. This however, will be less likely, if a church is honeycombed with small groups that act as intermediate units between the whole church and the family. The value of such intimate units has been recognised in many walks of life: in industry, in the armed forces, in the rehabilitation of prisoners, in University instruction, etc. In the great Methodist Revival of the eighteenth century, the class was such a group system that enabled the intimacy of personal relatedness and the

development of private devotions to be fostered. We could well study the effectiveness of the class on the spread of domestic Christianity in Wesley's day.

Group membership is valuable only in proportion as it is personal in quality. If it fosters respect and consideration for other people, if it enables us to begin to understand others, if loving relations are promoted, then it is worth having. In larger social circles, such as a whole church fellowship, we shall find it much more difficult to do this, and fellowship will tend to be increasingly superficial as the numbers grow. The small group of some 12-15 people however, enables all to participate in discussion, helps to remove 'Spectatorship', leads to frank and more realistic conversation, and promotes personal understanding. Thus in a lonely world, where people can feel alienated at so many levels, the group can be a loving fellowship of acceptance, understanding, and relatedness.

However, to function as a group, there must be a mutual objective that transcends all differences of social standing, of intellectual status, of personal temperament. A Bible study group gives this supremely, when the concern is to know the Lord sanctified in our personalities (1 Pet. 3, 15). It has been noted by historians that what preserved Jewry from being assimilated by Hellenisation and other cultures was not the priesthood for this aristocratic class often favoured such very trends. It was the Torah which served as the focal point around which the people could be rallied. The same is true with Christians today. If the faith once delivered to the saints were left to the hands of the theologians, our survival might be indeed precarious. As groups of simple believers however gather around the Word, to let it speak to their needs and lives, its power to transform human lives and to keep them will be found as efficacious as it has always been in the history of the Church.

Prior to the invention of printing and later the spread of literacy, the mass of Christians was dependent upon the few to read and to interpret the Scriptures. Even so, as Prof. Harnack has shown in his work, *Bible Reading in the Early Church*, this practice early began to have a marked effect upon pagan educational ideals. The self education of men like John Bunyan is also well known. However, in our educated age, the spread of literacy has reduced far more the need of monologue, and encourages the exercise of dialogue. Independence of mind makes man distrust much more the utterances of the pulpit, itself a creation of the Reformation. There is also an increasing prejudice, on the part of the non-religious, to the church as a valid institution. Many believe sincerely, that they can best express their honesty and integrity if they keep away from the church. Many have been stumbled by much apparent irrelevance of tradition, of superficiality of doctrine, and of personal inconsistencies among church-goers. The home thus has a neutral value to many prejudiced against church life. Within the home group all can feel free to participate in discussion, without feeling the restraint to keep silent, and having liberty to dissent or agree with the discussion. This freedom exercises greater realism and practical application of truth to the daily problems of life.

Types of Bible Study Groups

Home Bible study groups can take various forms. Three may be mentioned. In our own local church, we have divided the mid-week ministry meeting into small groups, meeting in several homes. The purpose is biblical instruction for believers. Notes are prepared beforehand for each occasion. Particularly helpful has been the policy to take up the subject of Bible ministry, given the previous Sunday morning. This consists of systematic instruction given each Sunday for half an hour before the Breaking of Bread service. To be able to reconsider this ministry in open discussion has proved most useful. The close encounter within the group has enabled a more personal understanding and sympathy for other people and the break down of prejudices, so knitting the fellowship closer together. To prevent the groups from forming cliques against each other, all groups meet together every five or six weeks for an introduction or conclusion to the series of Bible studies. If one particular evening is not convenient for some to meet together, then this could be a reason for another group to be formed. The personal informality and friendliness of these groups have attracted others to join, especially lonely women attached to the Women's meeting who may not yet be committed Christians.

Another type of group discussion is a 'school for personal evangelism', where training is given in making contacts and witness to non-Christians. This could also be related to elementary instruction in pastoral counselling, dealing with personal problems such as frustration, inferiority complexes, loneliness, depression, anxiety, etc. The purpose of such groups is to 'teach to teach others also'. Out of such a group a whole series of cells could grow within an area for purposes of neighbourhood evangelism.

Neighbourhood Bible study groups for purposes of evangelism are thus a third type of group meeting. An organised rally of evangelism in a district may well be viewed with suspicion by the local residents. Why this sudden blitz on them with tracts, with loud-speakers, tent meetings, etc.? This whole enterprise may appear to them ephemeral, concerned only with their 'souls', and not with themselves as whole persons. This is where neighbourhood group Bible studies can be so effective. People feel they belong genuinely to the group, where their personal problems, interests, outlooks can be considered, and where they can make friendships and be accepted. To start such a group in your neighbourhood, do so naturally among neighbours, parents of your children's friends, or those you sense have needs, such as those who crave acceptability, lonely people, or concerned anxiously about life in some way known to you. Let other members of the group do recruiting, so that you do not control it with all your own contacts. Certainly do not let too many Christians join it, or else you may tend to frighten off non-Christians. Take time to prepare for each session, and pray much about it beforehand. Let it be seen by your neighbours that your Christian faith is not just a hobby for Sundays, but integrated within all the problems of daily life and all its social contacts.

Conducting the Bible Study Groups

Much skill and humility are required on the part of the leaders of such groups, especially if used for neighbourhood evangelism. Never give the impression such groups are for experts. Assume much ignorance and avoid the lecture. Do not let the group think you are pontificating all truth. Let them feel they are getting it for themselves. Wherever possible let all who are willing take turns each week in leading the discussion. They will learn most who seek to teach. Avoid the inductive approach, which is the starting point of rigid orthodoxy. This is the skilled approach of the cultists such as Jehovah's Witnesses. At best this leaves the student armed with a denominational theology, rather than with a personal experience of the Bible. Rather use the deductive method, by raising questions that come naturally to mind from the passage. This approach assumes that what the Bible itself says is of far more importance to us than what we think it should be saying. If you convey the impression of having an open mind, then you are much more likely to get frank, open discussion from the rest of the group. It is easy to kill the truth; much more difficult to keep it alive (2 Cor. 3, 6). Try to apply your technical knowledge of the Scriptures therefore to life situations.

In handling discussion the group leader should try to be as inconspicuous as possible and not to monopolise the discussion. Stimulate discourse and enquiry by turning your significant observations, interpretations and applications into questions addressed to the group generally. But beware of the barrage of technical questions that leave your victim humiliated in ignorance. The discussion is not an exhibition ready staged for the excellence of the leader's knowledge. Make sure that no member is allowed to become offensive to the group; if so talk to him or her privately, and if necessary do so firmly. Distinguish between the poverty pauses when help is needed, from those occasions of fruitful silence when the challenge of the Word is being felt.

Do not attempt too crudely to distinguish between groups aimed at evangelism from those whose primary purpose is Bible study for Christians. Sometimes the latter may be more effective for non-Christians if they feel they are not being got at in discussion. Try not to be patronising to the non-Christians, either by hospitality or by information imparted. It is often a good thing to permit non-Christians in the group to feel it as expected of them, as much as anyone else, to share hospitality in rotation as the group meets from house to house. Sometimes the most exciting contacts are made in this way, as such a hostess can introduce her friends on this occasion. Do not choke the non-Christians in argument; if need be, let them say all they want, so that you know how they feel and react. In the early stages of such a group it is vital the leader should be a good listener. Do not be tempted to pack a drawing-room with a crowd and thereby think it a success. If need be, commence other groups with people who would not naturally fit together. The small group is essential if you want all to benefit deeply and personally. If the group lack much knowledge of the Bible, it is best to work systematically through a book

like Mark's or John's Gospel. Always have extra copies of a new translation to hand, and if need be take as long as the embarrassed searcher, who is opening the Bible for perhaps the first time in years. Usually the leader for a particular session should not be the host or hostess. Then it is realised the home is being lent for that evening. Then non-leaders will feel freer to offer their homes also. For purposes of evangelism make it quite clear that the neighbourhood group is inter-denominational. It is best that prominent local Christian leaders should not be directly active in promoting personally and publicly such groups.

Advantages of Group Discussions

Such groups meet people where they are, in their own homes. They create an atmosphere of informality that promotes friendships and alleviates the problem of loneliness. People can ask questions that they would feel too simple or stupid to ask in larger gatherings or from their minister, if they go to church. And you may well find that people who never go to church come along. As people study the Bible they begin to see that it really speaks to them in ways a sermon may never have done. The knowledge of the Christian is deepened realistically, for he is undistracted by any sermon structure or mere curiosity about the preacher. It is often a much clearer presentation of the relations of Scripture to life. Friendships are forged that make the participants feel they have never quite experienced such genuine fellowship before. Conditions are much more favourable for the elimination of prejudices that can remain harboured within the larger group of the church for years.

Some however may feel that there is one major disadvantage of group meetings in homes. What about the future of church meetings, if so much home activity is allowed to grow? Some of us have developed a strange superstition that the presence of the Lord is in some way especially with us when we come together 'as an assembly'. Why should not the promise of 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst' apply to the smaller group? Those local churches however that have developed group Bible study have found that instead of draining away the strength of the local church, rather they have promoted its well-being. For such a cellular structure of internal groups, within a church and a neighbourhood, integrates true fellowship, eliminates mere spectatorship, and enables the leaders to know far more effectively what others feel and what their problems really are. They can therefore arrange the public ministry of the church accordingly. As personal witness and therefore evangelism are so encouraged, the worship of the church will be improved. There will be more interest in the corporate prayer-life, for there will be more requests known and answered. The church will tend to become more outward-looking and less introverted. Perhaps the failure of so many of our Gospel services to-day is an indication that new means are needed, less dependent on one man, the speaker, and much more on the church as a whole. Group meetings point to the great need to-day to integrate far more our home-life with our church-life. When we do this we may find non-Christians far readier to listen to us.