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The Greening of a Discussion Leader

Lead an engaging discussion in any setting.

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I was one of the few Christians in my fraternity at the University of Michigan. I hit on the idea of leading a Bible study as a way of sharing my faith with the guys in the house. I announced this would be a free and open discussion concerning God and life, kicked off each week by a passage from the Bible. Privately, I was committed to using the time as a way of convincing them to believe the gospel. I was excited so many had shown up, and vowed to not waste the time with idle chatter. From that point on, it was all downhill.

Let me focus on how to avoid the pitfalls that doom the average religious discussion, as well as ways to generate lively participation.

You Wonder Why I Called This Meeting?

Before a leader calls people together, he or she needs to honestly face the question, "Do I really want a discussion?" The answer is not an automatic yes. Many times we try to use a discussion format because it's the "in" thing in group techniques. Our members want it, or our superior expects it, but in our heart of hearts, we're uncomfortable with the loss of control.

In my Bible study, I had a "hidden agenda." My actual purpose wasn't to have an interchange of ideas; it was to convince them to become Christians. They weren't dumb, and easily spoiled my ulterior motive and became defensive. Don't get me wrong. I'm all for evangelism. But a discussion group is a poor place to persuade because of behaviors that contribute to a defensive climate. Actions that show evaluation, control, strategy, superiority, and certainty all have a cooling effect on spontaneity.

Once I get it clearly in mind that I'm not trying to persuade, then I'm ready to plan a discussion. My aim is to stir up others to the point where they're willing to take the risk of saying what they think and becoming involved.

Building Bridges, Not Walls

There's a truism in the field of communication that states:

Communication = Content + Relationship

Whether the goal is to persuade someone to buy life insurance, reach a joint decision, or comfort a bereaved friend, two factors come into play: 1) the words spoken, and 2) how each party feels about the other.

Since words are the name of the game, it would be natural for us to focus on the content of communication. Yet we do so at our peril. No matter how provocative our discussion questions, or brilliant our repartee, the dialogue will become monologue if the relationship with the leader is out of kilter. Here are some things you can do to ensure that the group will want to participate:

- Learn names. There's nothing quite as demoralizing as being referred to as "the tall man with the beard in the back row." The mere possibility makes me want to sit on any idea I might share. Yet if someone cares enough to learn my name, suddenly I'm important, I count—and I want to respond.
- Get involved. Take the first step to develop a relationship.
- Try to divest yourself of accumulated clout. A difference in status can kill off a lively debate before it starts.

Popping the Question

Posing questions that elicit response is an acquired skill. Since it doesn't come naturally, let me outline an approach that works.

The first thing is to not ask a question with a right answer. The worst question is one that can be answered with a simple yes or no.

Suppose you want to stimulate thinking about Christ's Sermon on the Mount. The typical format would include questions such as: "What are the different components of the Lord's Prayer?" "How did Jesus enlarge the Commandment about adultery?" "What is the Lord's attitude toward seeking riches?" All of these are questions of fact, and they are almost guaranteed to generate little reaction.

On the other hand, you could put it this way: "You've read the Sermon on the Mount. Suppose Christian kids in your school were to put its teaching into effect for just one week. How would things be different?"

That's a whole different ballgame. Instead of one right answer, there are lots of possibilities. There's room for disagreement, even an argument. And since there's no way you can authoritatively state they are wrong, no one fears being shot down by the leader.

This suggests the second principle of popping the question: Make them the experts. During one meeting, I asked, "What do you guys think sin is? How would you define it?" They tried—they really did. But I was the one who knew sin could be defined as missing the mark, breaking the law, or

severing a relationship. They were aware I was one up on them. Besides, sin is a rather touchy subject if you feel that anything you say may be used against you.

Sensing their discomfort, I took a different tack. "What's the average guy at your high school like?" I asked. It took about two minutes of pump priming to convince them I really wanted to know, but after that, it was as if I'd turned on the spigot.

The bull session went all over the map with only occasional questions from me: "Is that right? Do most kids at school get drunk on weekends?" They didn't always agree with each other, but that added to the liveliness. And regardless of what they said, I couldn't contradict them. They knew much more about life as a teen-ager in their town than I did. I'd discovered a topic on which they were the experts.

A third principle of opening a discussion is to use vivid imagery. People think in pictures. You're ahead of the game if you help your group think in concrete terms. Otherwise they could just let abstract terms wash over them without ever engaging in the dialogue.

It's possible to visually portray almost any topic. Our spiritual pilgrimage over a period of time can be charted like the Dow Jones average. Drawing a seating plan and communication pattern at the dinner table can depict our family relations. I've led a Bible study on Mark 4—Jesus controlling the wind and waves—by having participants create a weather map similar to those seen on the evening news. Different areas of the country represent distinct areas of our lives. Traditional symbols for sunny, cloudy, thunderstorms, and fog show how we feel about our work, friends, home life, recreation, and God. For any of these issues, it's best to start with the nonverbal exercise, and then have people talk about their creation. Most of us are freer to speak up when we can refer to something tangible in our hands.

There are many structured exercises, games, and role-plays available commercially. Secular topics include leadership, roles, decision-making, cross-cultural communication, and creativity. Christian-oriented material is available for stimulating discussion about community, spiritual gifts, and many of Jesus' encounters with people in the Gospels. Both types can be effective because they stay away from the simplistic right/wrong answers, provide an experiential base that gives all an equal competence, and make an abstract ideal visual. But you don't need to wait for someone else to create structured experiences for you. With some imagination, you can make up your own discussion starters that are tailor-made for your situation.

Keeping the Ball Rolling

Starting a discussion is one thing; keeping it going is another. Your goal is to keep the energy level high. You've taken pains to get the beast off the ground, so take care not to let the air out of the balloon. What follows is a simple do and don't list I've found helpful:

1. Don't judge. You've set up your whole discussion on the premise there are no right answers. Don't give it the lie by evaluating their comments. I'm at my best when I take a quizzical stance: "You're not wrong, but I'm not sure you're right either." A gentle probing works wonders—never challenging, but in a friendly spirit of curiosity—exploring the depths of what another is saying.

2. Don't preach. This is so obvious it hardly seems worth mentioning. Yet many Christian leaders feel an irresistible urge to put in their two cents. Usually it comes across more like a dollar fifty and squelches contributions of others. Whenever I'm tempted to stick in my own opinion, I shut up. It's the height of arrogance to suppose others are going to be more interested in hearing my views than they are in expressing their own. So when I feel that gnawing desire to pontificate creeping over me, I make it a practice to wait at least sixty seconds. By that time, I'm usually glad I resisted the impulse to intervene. I suspect the group is even happier.
3. Don't take the detached stance of the scholar. You're the leader. The group will take its cue from you. If you lean back with your cheek in your hand as you objectively weigh each thought, the conversation will be dull and halting. If, however, you model excitement, the thing might catch fire.
4. Do plan ahead It's easy to fall into the trap of not listening to what people are saying because your mind is racing ahead trying to come up with your next question. Preparation is the only way to combat this tendency. It's important to bone up on a topic so you have illustrations at your fingertips. A discussion of tragic moral choice will go much better if I have a number of Rahab-type ethical dilemmas to trot out at the appropriate time. That kind of mastery takes effort.
5. Do use humor. I've stated that conflict enlivens a discussion. It's the same with laughter. Many leaders are afraid to use humor in a religious discussion. That's too bad. Humor is a great way of releasing tensions and keeping things loose. A discussion should be fun.
6. Do seek balanced participation. You need to deal head-on with the two thorniest problems facing a discussion leader: How to get the apathetic person to enter in, and how to prevent the monopolizer from dominating the discussion. Both extremes spell trouble.

There's no way you can assess the thoughts of a silent member, but the problem extends beyond that. His silence might have a chilling effect on others in the group. In dealing with apathy, it helps to realize that what looks like boredom often is fear instead. This is especially true in a new group. Each person is casting about to see where he fits, how he can contribute, and what he can expect from others. This uncertainty creates tension that contracts facial muscles and tightens vocal chords. So although his mind might lie racing with valuable insight, his actual appearance is one stage short of coma.

I approach apparent apathy more indirectly. I try to create an atmosphere so exciting that a guy or gal just has to share thoughts or they'll split. Controversy, humor, painting word pictures, creating common experiences, a nonjudgmental atmosphere, an informal setting, a high-energy level—all are designed as goads to overcome self-consciousness so everyone will take the plunge.

The group member who talks too much presents a very different kind of problem. When he's taking up most of the time, others are getting shut out. They might even decide that joining in is not worth the effort for fear of appearing as obnoxious as Mr. Know-it-all.

Your response to this person who has no unspoken thought will depend on the reason for the talkativeness. It's no use being subtle if he's insensitive to the reactions of the group. The firm approach works best: "Kathy, you've put in some interesting ideas. Now give some others a chance."

Excessive participation could be due to a special interest in the topic. In these cases, monopolizing

isn't chronic. The person merely gets caught up in a topic that fascinates him, and he has a chance to shine. A bit of private affirmation will usually bring the amount of participation down to an acceptable level.

Winding It Up

I'm often asked the best way to summarize a discussion. My advice is simple: Don't. A summary has three things against it. The main drawback is that it has a calming effect. It ties everything into a package. This imagery is reflected in typical discussion terminology. The summary is the time for "wrapping up." There are no loose ends. We can relax now because the topic, which seemed so uncertain and turbulent, is now reduced to a neat list of principles that won't bother anyone.

But you don't want that! The whole purpose of the discussion was to stimulate. You'd much rather see people walk out of the room arguing, churning with things yet to say, bothered by ideas they've heard. The best way to accomplish this is to simply cut off while things are going well.

Another problem with a summary is that it never catches the full flavor of what's been said. How could it? When you try to capture all the diverse elements of an hour-long discussion in a three-minute synthesis, something is bound to be lost.

Finally, there's the ever-present problem of evaluation lurking just below the surface. Although it's theoretically possible to summarize in a purely descriptive fashion, judgment almost always creeps in. People have long memories. You've stated up front that there are no right answers. If your mood and manner at the end give those words the lie, it can be fatal the next time you try to get people to open up. They'll figure you will give the "true answer" at the end, so they'll sit back aloofly and wait for you to lay it on them.

Leading a discussion is tough. It would be easy to try out some of the ideas given here, fall flat on your face, and then revert back to the safety of straight lecture. But that's not an option for the sensitive leader. The only way to find out what people are thinking is to ask them. Sometimes it's risky finding out. It's even more risky not to know.

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