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The  
DISCUSSION  
GROUP

*A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK  
FOR LEADERS AND MEMBERS*

BY

S. M. BARRETT, L.Th.

*Superintendent of the Department for Religious Instruction,  
Methodist Church, New South Wales.*

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THE BOOK DEPOT  
135 Castlereagh Street,  
SYDNEY.

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## *Contents.*

	Page
Introduction .. .. .	5
1. Questing Youth .. .. .	7
2. Discussion-Group Method .. .. .	10
3. Problems and Mistakes .. .. .	17
4. Education for Action .. .. .	20
5. The Hallowing of Romance .. .. .	24
6. The Bible Class as a Discussion Group .. .. .	27
7 A Course of Reading for Leaders .. .. .	30

*All your questions large and deep,  
All the open thought of youth,  
Bring to Him; and you shall reap  
All the harvest of His truth:  
You shall find in that great store  
Largest love and wisest lore.*

—C. E. Murdie.

## INTRODUCTION.

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This booklet is written for those who wish to conduct Discussion Groups and Study Circles, and also for those who would be active members of such groups. A need has been felt for a simple statement of the principles and procedure underlying successful discussion groups. For some years the idea of "getting together and talking things over" has been growing in popularity. More and more it is being realised that there is a wonderful opportunity for advancing the Kingdom of God by using the group method.

The writer hopes that this booklet may also serve to draw attention to the possibilities of making the Bible Class more attractive and interesting, and therefore, more effective. We lament over the number of scholars who drop out of the Sunday School and Church when they reach adolescence. Here is something which may help disappointed workers. It is not suggested that merely changing over to discussion-group methods will completely arrest this drift, but, from experience, it can be asserted that some of the most vigorous Bible Classes are those where this freer type of group work is being used and where interest is stimulated by frank discussion.

This booklet, which is obviously not exhaustive, is sent forth in the hope that its practical suggestions may be of value to the fine band of workers amongst youth.

—S.M.B.

Sydney.



## CHAPTER I.

---

### *Questing Youth.*

It is very important that leaders should understand their young people, and, indeed, that the young folk should know something about themselves.

Let us consider here the stages of middle and late adolescence; those between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, and eighteen and twenty-four. In all normal young folk, even at the age of thirteen and fourteen, great changes begin to take place and continue into the early twenties. It is a period in which there are new forces at work within the individual, new powers of body and mind seeking expression. One cannot do better than give here a summary of thought gleaned from various works on psychology. The young life is called upon to adjust itself to reality and the wider life of the world. First, there is the adjustment to society. The sheltered, isolated, self-centred life is inadequate for community living. New powers are at work leading the creature to seek full communion with fellow-creatures. We are social beings, and if we fail to make this adjustment then our life is incomplete. Secondly, there is a deep, inner urge demanding adjustment to the potential mate. The psychologist informs us that from the point of view of character-formation, it matters relatively little whether the young person ultimately marries; it is of vital importance that he or she be psychologically adjusted to the potential mate and to the idea of parenthood. And thirdly, we all need to make adjustment to God. He or she who has not faced the great question of belief in God, is still an

immature adult. Nor will it suffice to go through life with inadequate conceptions of God based on experiences of early childhood. This needs to be recognised as a serious maladjustment leading to sad results in everyday life and to unreality in religious experience.

The maturing life, then, is launching out into wider spheres and is trying to adjust itself to new relations and fresh experiences. Consequently, the young person's reasoning faculties become more active, and, under guidance, he will begin to think deeply and purposefully on the great realities of the new life into which he is growing. The age for asking vital questions has arrived. In the earlier years much has been accepted on authority, but with the emergence of individuality, the adolescent will ask, as one English Headmaster expressed it, "the most devastating questions." It is no less than tragic for youth to be patronised, suppressed, and sometimes snubbed at this stage. The offending elders would do well to note Arthur Benson's words: "What is too sacred to speak about, very soon becomes too sacred to think about." We should welcome frankness and seize the opportunity which the open, enquiring mind presents. Open discussion is good for the mind as open confession, according to the old adage, is good for the soul.

A word should be added about youth's choice of ideals. During this period of life, the individual is more susceptible, than at any other, to the acceptance of noble ideals. If the Christian ideals are presented in a clear and challenging manner, it will be found that youth will respond to the challenge. The leader should realise how important is his or her part here, and what need there is for sympathetic understanding and tactful handling of youth; so great are the issues, fixed for life and destiny, by a youthful decision. Just as the critical moment in the life of a river is when it tumbles definitely on one

side of the watershed, so the critical moment in the life of a man is when he sees with the eyes of understanding and takes hold of that which is good. "Where a man will sit at eighty depends largely upon the direction he takes at eighteen."

*"One ship goes East, another West,  
With the self-same winds that blow,  
'Tis the set of the sail and not the gale  
That determines the way they go.  
Like the ships of the sea are the ways of men;  
As they journey along through life,  
'Tis the set of the soul that determines the goal,  
And not the calm or the strife."*



## CHAPTER II.

### *Discussion-Group Method.*

We have considered in the previous chapter the main characteristics of youth, and now we shall examine discussion-group methods which are designed to meet their requirements.

For the heading of this chapter we might have used the learned term "dialect." The Greeks were skilled in discourse and argument and this was their word, *dialektikos*. So the word means for us "testing of truth by discussion." In all good teaching there are various devices used and these are sometimes called (1) Stimulative: evoking interest, provoking curiosity and thought, and maybe, action. (2) Associative: proceeding from the known to the unknown, grafting new ideas on to the old. (3) Informative: imparting new ideas and new facts. (4) Appreciative: learning to observe and to form judgments. We might add others such as Analytic, breaking up, and Synthetic, building up.

It will serve our purpose to consider two basic principles of teaching. These are (a) deductive, and (b) inductive. In the first, a truth is stated and then illustrations and arguments are produced to prove it, or to make out a strong case. In the second, we have the reverse method. The truth is withheld; illustrations and examples are given, problems and experiences are discussed, and carefully planned questions are asked; all with a view to leading the members to discover the truth for themselves. There are occasions when either method may be used; so much

depends upon the subject to be discussed and the type of members in the circle. Educationists emphasise the greater value of the inductive method. When young people work through a problem and find the solution for themselves, a deeper impression is made upon their minds; their interest is stimulated, curiosity provoked; they are led to study and think for themselves. It cannot be too strongly stressed that "telling is not teaching." Leaders and teachers who let loose a veritable flood of talk upon their young people are employing the best means to produce boredom. "They also serve who only stand and wait" is a truth not intended for the healthy, vigorous adolescent. The leader must not arbitrarily impose his views upon his group. He should encourage the members to express their thoughts, no matter how crude, and should lead their thinking along such lines as will enable them to draw sound conclusions. It is important that the conclusions should be their own, not forced upon them from without.

### *HOW TO RUN THE GROUP.*

**AIM.**—This, we have already considered when dealing with method. In short, we wish to encourage young folk to think, to study, to voice their opinions, to form sound judgments and to accept lofty ideals. We aim not merely at imparting a set of facts, but at producing an inner experience, which leads to noble living.

**SIZE OF GROUP.**—A group becomes somewhat unwieldy if it is large; some members remain passive and are overlooked. The best work can be done with a group comprising eight to twelve in number. It is possible then to get every member to take part, the shy as well as the talkative.

**AGE.**—The ideal thing is to group members of similar ages. If there is too great a disparity, the younger members keep silent; discussion is monopolised by the older and more experienced. Age

groups may be 14-16, with the sexes kept apart, 17-19 and 19-24. As a general rule it is a good thing for these latter groups to be mixed, and especially so with the older group. (See Chapter 5.)

**HINTS ON PROCEDURE.** (a) Devotions.—As this booklet is concerned with discussion groups and study circles which deal with religious subjects, an opening of a devotional nature is recommended. Once the group is organised, the leader may get various members to conduct the opening. One may be selected and asked to prepare for the next meeting or session. Advice about the preparation should be given, perhaps privately. A short litany may be chosen or a reading from Scripture, followed by prayer. Variety is not only the spice of life, it may be said to be the spice of group-worship also. Get variety. The spirit of worship and the right atmosphere are most helpful in our circles. By way of an alternative, it is sometimes advisable to leave the devotional part till the end. For example, when concluding a series of studies, an excellent climax may be reached by finishing with devotions.

(b) Introduction.—According to the matter in hand, the leader may give a short introduction, with the emphasis on "short." (See Chapter 3.) Since we favour here the inductive method—members seeking and finding for themselves—the introduction should be wisely prepared, lest it disclose the truth or conclusion which is sought. A good introduction is that which arrests the attention, excites curiosity, and thus evokes discussion.

(c) Self-Teaching by Discussion.—If we look upon the subject to be discussed as a problem, then the leader's part is to have a number of carefully planned questions. Members are thus guided to discover the solution for themselves and the truth is more likely to be indelibly impressed upon their minds. When questions are asked by the group

which members cannot answer satisfactorily amongst themselves, the capable leader will seize the opportunity to impart fresh ideas. The group then ends richer than it began. Let the leader not be annoyed when questions are pressed upon him. His group is then like a nest of young birds with mouths open to receive food; let the food be of high quality and his work will be well rewarded.

(d) Application.—A very important factor is the relating to everyday life of the truth or principle arising out of the discussion. What a waste of time some discussions are when they stray from the theme and lead nowhere! The application must not be a laboured effort on the part of the leader. At this point the truth should be so self-evident that the group will have won their way through. Consider the classical illustrations of this method in the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. After telling the parable, Jesus asked: "Which of these three men, in your opinion, proved neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?" The lawyer replied: "The man who took pity on him." Said Jesus: "Then go and do the same." We shall have more to say on the "application" in another chapter.

The following simple scheme is given as an illustration of the method advocated above. Study books are not usually set out in this way, but it is advisable for leaders to make some such plan in their own preparation.

#### WHAT IS THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE?

**LEADER'S AIM.**—To lead the members to consider and appreciate the principles of true happiness.

**MATERIAL FOR RESEARCH.**—Jno. 10:1-11; Matt. 20:20-28; Acts 16:6-25. (It may be Scripture or some study book.)



**LIFE-INTEREST APPROACH.**—(The normal, healthy youth desires a full and happy life. Generally it is sought in the pleasant and entertaining things. The leader aims at bringing them to a deeper view. Hence a good life-interest approach may be made along the lines suggested by the following questions.)

- (1) Are we meant to be happy?
- (2) What makes one happy? (Consider our pleasures, the talkies, sport, etc.)
- (3) Do you think work makes us happy or unhappy? (Lead them to consider the winning of success by hard work.)

(Let the members freely express their views. The leader, having set them on the quest, directs them by means of simple but planned questions.)

**SEEKING A SOLUTION.**—How may we recognise a happy person? (All kinds of ideas may be expressed. Stimulate interest and then introduce what a man like Robert Louis Stevenson had to say about it.)

"A happy man or woman," said Stevenson, "is a better thing to find than a five-pound note. He or she is a radiating focus of good-will; and their entrance into a room is as though another candle had been lighted."

Do you think we can discover this secret?

**FIRST.**—The leader will bring the discussion around to the question of honest and useful work. If life were one long holiday, do you think we would be satisfied? What do we learn from the toiler and the loafer? Read 2 Thess. 3:7-13. "We did not loaf in your midst." (Moffat.)

Discuss hobbies, but do not let the group get sidetracked.

Discuss Hugh Black's words: "One of the great lessons of life is to learn not to do what one likes, but

to like what one does." Compare Nelson's words concerning the battle at Aboukir. With shot and splinters from the deck flying all about him, he said: "This is warm work, and it may be the last of us at any minute." Then, as he turned away: "But I wouldn't be elsewhere for thousands."

**SECOND.**—The group may consider the serving life. "The happiest people on earth are those who are doing the most for others." Do you think this statement is true? And why? What is the difference between the "getting" and "giving" life? Let the group search for the truth. Matt. 10:39 and 20:20-28. Let the group cite characters that illustrate this point. Paul, stoned, imprisoned, bearing stripes, suffering shipwreck, and yet able to say: "I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation." David Livingstone, who, after his terrible sufferings in Africa, said: "I never made a sacrifice in my life."

**THIRD.**—This arises out of the previous discussion: the inner resources. Does your happiness depend on the things that may happen to you? (There will probably be a good deal of difference of opinion.) When members are getting keen, ask them to turn to Acts 16:16-25. Then ask them to explain Paul and Silas singing in prison. They had resources on which they could fall back. Happy, though in prison! Consider the words of Jesus uttered at the Last Supper on the last dreadful night of His earthly life: "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." No man could touch the reserves of His happiness. How shall we explain this? It did not depend on outward circumstances. We mentioned R. L. Stevenson at the outset of our discussion. Does anyone know about his life? Yes, he was a great sufferer. In a letter which he wrote to Meredith he said: "For fourteen years I have not had a day's real health; I have wakened sick and gone to bed weary; and I have done my day un-

flinchingly. I have written in bed and out of it; written in haemorrhages, written in sickness, written torn by coughing, written when my head swam from weakness. . . . And the battle goes on. I was made for a contest." And yet this was the man who could pray: "Give us to awaken with smiles; give us to labour smiling; and as the sun lightens the world, so let our loving-kindness make bright this house of our habitation."

**THE OUTCOME.** (The members are encouraged to draw their own conclusions. It is their life with which we are concerned, and not merely past facts).

- (1) Where do I look for my happiness? Will any of the things I choose fail me some day?
- (2) What is the secret of lasting happiness? (Have in mind the summary: (a) Life of usefulness; (b) life of service, sacrifice; and (c) life rich in resources.)
- (3) Is it possible for us to win the highest happiness by ourselves, or by our own effort? (The leader wishes the group to consider the question of yielding our wills, our lives to Christ.)

### CHAPTER III.

#### *Problems and Mistakes.*

This chapter is primarily for inexperienced leaders, and the writer asks to be excused if he appears to "dot the i's and cross the t's."

**LECTURING.**—A mistake common among leaders is that of lecturing their groups. To commence with a wordy discourse is to strangle interest at birth. Leaders should avoid monopolising the discussion. Their aim is to get the members working. All leaders should remember that no one likes to have views forced upon him. The dogmatic attitude, no matter how well intentioned, is alien to free and friendly discussion.

**DEBATING.**—The discussion group or study circle must not be confused with the debating society. No matter how admirable it may be to master oratory, we have a far wider aim than that of developing public speakers. The group approach to a subject is different from that of the debating society. Members are not primarily concerned with matters on which they differ, or with scoring points against their fellow-members. They seek, rather, the things on which they can agree. Differences inevitably occur and when agreement is impossible, members are encouraged to agree to differ. Hence leaders should check any tendencies which may lead to division and even hostility. Explain to new members that the group is for the pooling of resources and for mutual aid. Co-operation is its keynote.



*THE DOMINATING MEMBER.*—Frequently the circle will include a dominating character. He is usually a most willing worker or talker, in fact, too willing. When each question is raised he literally takes the floor, to the exclusion of all others. Obviously, this abrogates group principles. Introduce humour and then with a little banter, point out that he does all the work and is too eager. In this way make an opening for others to share the discussion.

*THE ULTRA CRITIC.*—The writer has in mind the person who offers only destructive criticism and negations. We should not stifle sound criticism, but we need to direct it along constructive lines. Leaders may counter the destructive by asking for a constructive statement. Unless this tendency in some members be carefully handled, the whole group soon develops a sense of futility.

*THE REBEL.*—There is the person who is always "agin the government." Our recalcitrant friend needs to be constantly humoured and his thrust met with a smile. This tends to wear down his argumentative attitude and to disarm his antagonism. Given sympathetic treatment, he may be a very capable member. Considerable care should be taken to avoid heated argument lest it cause disruption.

*THE SIDE-TRACKER.*—On occasions the leader will have to deal with the wanderer. This member cannot keep to the theme and, if left uncontrolled, will side-track the discussion. As a general rule, it may be added, it is inadvisable to permit the group to digress very far. It takes an experienced leader to know when a useful end may be served by allowing the discussion to shoot off at a tangent.

*THE SILENT MEMBER.*—The reserved, passive member constitutes a real problem for most leaders. He may be a very thoughtful person, but is content

to be a sleeping partner. A leader should prepare special questions to which he is most likely to respond. In addition, it may be found helpful to ask such a member to prepare an assignment for the next session. When this is presented, the leader should give special recognition. Gradually a person of this type will gain confidence.

*THE PATRONISING ATTITUDE.*—There are times when a member asks a question and is more or less snubbed for his pains. A superior, patronising attitude on the part of either leader or member is indefensible and should be promptly suppressed.

The discussion-group may be viewed as a cross-section of the community. There you have represented different temperaments and view-points. The members need to learn how to appreciate each other's point of view; how to give and take; how to contribute to each other's welfare. Do not expect to solve all the problems of the universe in your group. If you lead the members into a rich fellowship, if you teach them the meaning of co-operation, and assist them to develop skill in human relationships, your group will have accomplished great things. Above all, in this group-fellowship, let youth catch a vision of what God wills them to be.



## CHAPTER IV.

### *Education for Action.*

The plan followed by leaders for their discussions will usually lead to a section designated "application" or "outcome." It is this section with which we are here concerned, and we shall find it to be of vital importance.

If we were to ask our young people why they drop out of our church societies, we should doubtless receive a wide variety of answers. They, perhaps, would not be conscious of one of the chief reasons: that their religious enthusiasm had been allowed to run into a cul-de-sac. When this takes place it is liable to produce either the crank or the backslider. We do well to heed the warning of the psychologist, that it is definitely harmful to the individual for the emotions to be constantly aroused and for no outlet to be provided. "Experience and expression," says Dr. Stanley Jones, "are the two sides of the Christian life, and one cannot exist without the other."

Little do some of our sincere leaders realise that, in effect, they are teaching youth how to talk and talk about the great questions of life, and to do nothing about them. Much of our religious enthusiasm and energy, which would go far towards building a better world, is wasted in loquacious groups who complacently acquiesce in the practices of a pagan world. Thus we find that not a few of the more thoughtful of our young people, who have had their minds challenged by Christian ideals and their emotions deeply stirred by religious appeals, are,

ironically enough, creating organisations beyond the Church in order to put into practice the programme of Christ. "The Church," it has been said, "holds the key to a new world and youth asks to see that key turning in the lock."

Some of the discussions will enable members to gain knowledge which is valued for itself; i.e., it may serve cultural and spiritual ends. Under this we include personal religious experience, personal problems of faith and conduct. The outcome should lead to action on the part of the individual. There will be occasions, however, when the discussion might well lead to some form of group action. Young people need educating in the technique of service and Christian social action.

Let us imagine that the group is discussing the question: "What is the Christian attitude towards the liquor traffic?" The members may set out in pairs to gather all the data available. A couple may go direct to the Temperance Society, others to Public Libraries to search for statistics on Drink, and others may visit different areas in order to note the number of hotels in certain localities, the type of surroundings, living conditions, etc. By careful guidance the youth may thus be led to observe for himself and to form his own judgments. There can be no doubt of the conclusion to which sound judgment will lead. The whole effect of such study and discussion will be more definite and lasting than the method of lecturing youth into abstinence. They may be helped to realise the action and reaction that takes place: some men are poor and depraved because of drink, others are drunkards because of their social environment and industrial conditions. The group may even wish to take political action by making their views known to the local member for Parliament at election time. There is no reason why they should not receive guidance and encouragement in their undertaking.

The syllabus should include questions relating to Christian citizenship and having reference to social reconstruction. Of course, there are adults who distrust youth here, and would confine their efforts to questions of drink and gambling. The argument advanced is that there is a likelihood of involving the Church in party politics. On this point, youth must certainly be guided; on no consideration can the Church enter party politics or party politics enter the Church. However, the fact remains that, while seeking to avoid this vexing situation, the Church must not fail to educate youth in the application of Christian principles to their citizenship. Christian youth must be helped to study some of the most perplexing questions of the day. For example: "Is the present form of society Christian?" "What has religion to do with unemployment?" "What is the Christian's attitude to slums?" "Should a Christian bear arms?" Active group members will carry out research work and make investigations with a view to reporting back to the group and discussing these matters. Under the inspiration of the Spirit of Christ young people will be led to work for the building of a better world.

To attempt this type of work will, after all, only be following the lead given us by Youth Departments in the churches of Great Britain. Take, for example, the Methodist Order of Christian Citizenship in England. Its members declare their Christian allegiance in the following terms:—

"We declare our allegiance to Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life.

"We confess Him the Saviour of Mankind.

"We acknowledge our failures to discover and to do His will."

At this time:—

"We hear the call of Christ to the adventure of His Kingdom."

And therefore:—

"We dedicate our citizenship to the service of Christ and Humanity, to the end that freedom and justice, virtue and neighbourly regard, goodwill and peace, may be established on the earth."

This declaration of allegiance is then interpreted as involving a set of personal resolves and social aims, a section of which reads: "We have the personal resolve to bring our highest skill, courage, and trustworthiness to the daily service of our fellows;" and over against this stands the social aim, "To remove the burden of economic strain, injustice and poverty from all sections of the community; to secure a wider diffusion of the benefits of education and of the fruits of industry; and to uphold and to extend religious and civil liberty."

By this means young people are guided in forming Christian conviction and establishing Christian loyalty, and through personal dedication and self-discipline, are led to work for a more Christian social order.

Let us conclude this chapter with a story that has a moral. In one of his books Dr. Stanley Jones describes a visit he made to Valparaiso. This harbour is noted for its beauty, as its name signifies, "the vale of paradise." Strangely enough this beautiful haven is strewn with the hulks of wrecked ships. At times terrific storms break in from the ocean and the only safe thing for the mariner to do, is to weigh anchor and make for the open sea. Ships that hug the safety of the harbour are almost invariably wrecked. Think of it, safety is found in the open sea! Every worth-while cause will involve an element of risk.



## CHAPTER V.

### *The Hallowing of Romance.*

"Let us not always say,  
'Spite of this flesh to-day,  
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole,  
As the bird wings and sings,  
Let us cry, 'All good things  
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more now, than flesh  
helps soul.'"

—Robert Browning.

All the world loves a lover. Then why is it that we laugh at romantic young people? Why is it that lovers are the object of merry jests? After all, it is a serious matter.

In this booklet we have been dealing with the fellowship of young people and, in an earlier chapter, the mixing of the sexes was recommended for those of eighteen years or more. Now let us consider this question. To-day, we are realising that the mutual attraction of young men and women is an influence so strong, so profound and so universal, that it has a deep significance in the Divine scheme of things. The psychologist has enabled us to understand more clearly that man and maid are different mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The modern development is for young people not merely to play together, but to think together. "Experience is teaching us," writes Dr. A. H. Gray, "that men and women think more truly together than they do apart. There is something about the sweep and range of man's thought which is peculiarly stimulating to woman's

mind, and there are aspects of truth to which men remain blind until women point them out."

Young people are brought together in a natural, wholesome way, by medium of the discussion group and study camp. There, they learn how to meet together and how to work together. Their relationships may be jolly; they should never be silly. Members learn that mutual companionship is a healthy, bracing and splendid thing. They so supplement and stimulate one another that their discussions become most beneficial. On rare occasions criticism of the mixed group or camp is heard. Of course, much depends on good leadership. Given this, is it not far better that young men and women should find their kindred souls and life partners in the study group than in the public dance palais? "But," say some, "they are too young." Let us be honest. Do we accept the Divine scheme of things? We want our young folk to learn that this phase of life also is God's gift, and, as such, must be treated as precious and sacred.

Love teaches the highest lesson of life; it teaches us to give. It was to a young man that Jesus said, "If you want to be full-grown, give all that you have." To fall in love is not merely to become sentimental, fascinated or intoxicated; it is to become unselfish. It gives the power to plunge out of your own world and live in someone else's. It means sympathy, sacrifice, and, maybe, suffering. Only the language of religion is adequate to describe it: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears rich fruit."

Take the delightful case of the great preacher, Hugh Price Hughes. As a student nineteen years old, he fell in love with May Katherine, a demure girl of fifteen. Theirs was a rich and happy partnership. Hughes's ministry for Christ was her ministry too. Thirty-three years after the first dawning



of their love, she laid her partner to rest. On the only wreath placed on the coffin when committed to the grave there was a card bearing this inscription: "To Hugh from Katie," and on the other side, "He's for the morning." Love is blessedness.

Let this chapter conclude with the words of Rev. T. S. Gregory. "Love," he says, "is present mirth and present laughter; it is all the gaiety and tenderness, all the humour and maytime of the world. It is the glory of Easter morning, and of those who share without shame or flinching or the necessity to conceal, all the mystery of life. Only angels can sing about its advent into the world—so divine it is. But remember it always takes two to make or mar one sweetheart. Remember that when you say or think or sing, 'I love you,' you are using God's words, and you must use them in God's way. So, if you are thinking of saying them one to another, I wish you the best in God's name."

## CHAPTER VI.

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### *The Bible Class as a Discussion Group.*

In approaching this chapter, the writer visualises a certain old-time Bible Class in which the young people gathered with their teacher after the devotional opening of the Sunday School. Each Sunday the same course was monotonously followed without the slightest variation. The members of the class would each in turn read a verse of Scripture till the set passage had been covered. The teacher would monopolise the remainder of the period by giving the lesson. Not infrequently, this was a tedious, moralizing discourse, during the delivery of which occasion was taken to preach at the long-suffering young people. Let it be said that there were exceptions to this type when gifted adults exercised a most beneficial influence on their young folk. To-day, however, the adolescent has a very drastic way of dealing with the dull, stereotyped Bible Class; he ceases to attend, and it ceases to survive.

There are, of course, many contributing causes as to why young people have dropped out of the Sunday School, and it is not suggested that a mere change of method would bring about a full restoration of membership. We are justifiably suspicious of "cure-all" remedies. However, it is inexcusable for our Bible Classes not to benefit by the reorientation that has taken place in educational principles and practices of modern times. The centre of gravity has shifted from the lesson material to the pupil him-

self; the aim is not so much to impart information, though this is in the background, as to draw out the pupil's innate powers to their fullest development.

Further, there is a definite swing away from religious individualism. Doubtless, the pressing social needs of our time are compelling a change of emphasis. If not carried too far, this should bring a healthy balance. As Dr. J. S. Whale has recently reminded us in his introduction to the new "Cambridgeshire Syllabus of Religious Teaching," "The Christian faith is something corporate. Our religion is indefeasibly social." We cannot live to ourselves and hold for long our Christian experience. Our personal experience of God through Christ brings us into the fellowship of believers and stimulates us to social action in which we serve the Kingdom of God.

The Bible Class conducted on the lines of a discussion group has the advantage of affording greater scope for fellowship and co-operation. There is no doubt of the appeal that the changed method makes to youth. The writer is acquainted with churches where surprising results have been achieved. Citing one instance, a class was reorganised and a new start made with a membership of five. In the course of time some new members were enrolled and others were drafted in from the Sunday School, till the enrolment reached thirty-six. After having been given a fair trial, it was found that the young people were being held. The Trustees of the Church have been so impressed that they have erected a special building with suitable accommodation for what are now three Sunday discussion groups. In these days of declining causes it is heartening to record such success on the part of enterprising leaders.

It may be advisable, in reorganising this class, to drop the old title. The writer has met with young people who are decidedly prejudiced against anything styled a Bible Class. Older folk cannot always

appreciate this, and they tend to become annoyed with such an attitude. The term "leader" may be substituted for that of "teacher," and "Bible Class" may give way to "Discussion Group." Even a rearrangement of the furniture will help in suggesting the change of attitude.

More important, however, is the type of study to be used. An excellent book of studies is that entitled, "Unto the Hills," published by the Joint Board of Graded Lessons of Australia and New Zealand. These studies are set up in an attractive manner with home readings for each day, sections for study and questions for discussion. In addition, the Board publishes a special "Leaders' Handbook," with corresponding studies. A very thorough course of New Testament studies for young adolescents is given in Basil Mathew's three volumes, "Jesus and Youth." For groups comprised of older members, a comprehensive and stimulating course of study is provided in the series of "Senior Lesson Handbook," published by the National Sunday School Union, London. These cover subjects relating to biblical, doctrinal, racial, social and international questions. A suggestion for the older groups held on Sundays or week-nights, is that they make a close study of the Gospels. For this purpose T. R. Glover's "Jesus of History" (S.C.M. Press, about 6/-), is an excellent book. An appendix is supplied with questions arranged for each chapter. Other books with a questionnaire for group work are Weatherhead's "The Transforming Friendship," "Jesus and Ourselves," and "His Life and Ours."



## CHAPTER VII.

### *Course of Reading for Leaders.*

With a view to encouraging young, prospective leaders to become more acquainted with their subjects, a course of reading is indicated by the following book list. For the most part, the cheaper publications have been chosen and quite a comprehensive course may be covered for a few shillings.

#### ABOUT THE BIBLE.

- "The Light of the Bible," by V. F. Storr (Hodder), dealing with the contents.
- "The Making and Meaning of the Bible," by G. Barclay (S.C.M.), dealing with contents and our understanding of the Bible.
- "How We Got Our Bible," by J. Paterson Smyth (Low), an account of the manuscripts, versions and translations.
- "The Gospel Sources," by D. Wilson (S.C.M.), an introduction to the problems of the Gospels.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY.

- "The Old Testament and Modern Discovery," by S. L. Caiger (S.P.C.K.).
  - "Bible and Spade," by S. L. Caiger (Oxford University Press).
  - "Digging Up the Past," by Sir Leonard Woolley (Pelican).
  - "Ur of the Chaldees," by Sir Leonard Woolley (Pelican).
- All of these deal with archaeological work in Bible lands.

#### LIFE AND TEACHING OF JESUS.

- "The Life of Jesus," by Basil Mathews (Oxf. U.P.).
- "The Jesus of History," by T. R. Glover (S.C.M.).
- "The Significance of Jesus," by W. R. Maltby (S.C.M.).
- "Jesus As They Saw Him," by J. A. Findlay (Epworth).
- "What Did Jesus Teach?" by J. A. Findlay (Hodder).

- "The Manhood of the Master," by H. E. Fosdick (S.C.M.).
- "The Parables of the Gospels and Their Meaning for Today," by Hugh Martin (S.C.M.).

#### LIFE AND LETTERS OF ST. PAUL.

- "Paul of Tarsus," by T. R. Glover (S.C.M.).
- "A Portrait of St. Paul," by J. A. Findlay (Epworth).
- "Paul the Dauntless," by Basil Mathews (Partridge).

#### CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND CONDUCT.

- "Finding God," by A. Herbert Gray (S.C.M.).
- "Meaning of Faith," by H. E. Fosdick (S.C.M.).
- "Meaning of Prayer," by H. E. Fosdick (S.C.M.).
- "The Senior Lesson Handbook," edited by E. H. Hayes and Godfrey Pain (N.S.S.U.).
- "Why Be Good?" by James Reid (Hodder).
- "Love: The One Solution," by A. Herbert Gray (Rich and Cowan).
- "Jesus and Ourselves," by L. D. Weatherhead (Epworth).
- "Moral Adventure," by B. H. Streeter (S.C.M.).

#### CHURCH HISTORY.

- "A First Church History," by Vera Walker (S.C.M.).
- "Outline History of the Christian Church," by Dorothea Stevens (S.P.C.K.).
- "The Story of Christianity," by T. F. Kinloch (Evans).

#### MISSIONARY BOOKS.

- "The Clash of Colour," by Basil Mathews.
- "Christianity and the Race Problem," by J. H. Oldham, (S.C.M.).
- "Jesus Christ and the World's Religions," by Paton.

#### PSYCHOLOGY.

- "Psychology and the Christian Life," by T. W. Pym (S.C.M.).
- "Psychology and Life," by Leslie D. Weatherhead (Hodder).
- "The New Psychology and the Teacher," by H. Crichton Miller (Jarrolds).
- "Psychology and Morals," by Hadfield (Methuen).

#### SOCIAL AND NATIONAL PROBLEMS.

- "Christ and the Kingdom of God," by Hooke (S.C.M.).
- "The Meaning of Service," by H. E. Fosdick (S.C.M.).
- "The Christian's Alternative to War," by Richards (S.C.M.).



- "The Christian as Soldier," by Hugh Martin (S.C.M.).  
"The Church's Attitude to Peace and War" (S.C.M.).  
Oxford Pamphlets on World Affairs.  
"The Acquisitive Society," by R. H. Tawney (Bell).  
"This Unemployment: Disaster or Opportunity," by V.  
A. Demant (S.C.M.).  
"Religion and the Rise of Capitalism," by R. H. Tawney  
(Penguin).  
"Betting Facts," by E. Benson Perkins (S.C.M.).  
"Health and Temperance Manual," by V. E. Stanton  
(Temperance Council, Sydney).

#### COMMENTARIES.

- "Peake's Commentary on the Bible" (Jack). Also  
Supplement.  
"A Teacher's Commentary" (S.C.M.).  
"The Mission and Message of Jesus," by H. D. A. Major,  
T. W. Manson and C. J. Wright (Nicholson and Wat-  
son). An outstanding exposition of the Gospels.

