

# P.S.

**I**N A FAMOUS STUDY of behavioural psychology, two groups of people were asked to estimate the solution to a mathematical problem. One group was asked to guess the answer to  $8 \times 7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$ . The other group was asked to estimate  $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5 \times 6 \times 7 \times 8$ . Anyone with a recollection of childhood maths will spot that the two questions are identical and can be expressed as 'guess the answer to eight factorial'. The only difference is the way the problem is expressed.

The interesting part of the experiment is that, although the problem is the same in both cases, the individuals in the first group estimated the answer to be much higher than those in the second. The average answer of the first group was 2,250, the second 512 (in point of fact, they were both way off the mark; the actual answer is in fact much bigger: 40,320). This happened, not because of any particular mathematical superiority possessed by the first group, *but because of how the question was phrased*. Because the first group were presented with bigger numbers first ( $8 \times 7 \times 6 \times 5 \dots$ ) they estimated a higher answer than those who first noticed the smaller numbers ( $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \dots$ ). Probably what happens is that when you are asked the question you begin to calculate the answer, and if you start with bigger numbers you guess a bigger answer.

But the real point at issue, illustrated compellingly in our little mathematical puzzle, is to do with the presentation of information. It is not just *what* is said but also *how* it is said that is important. How information is packaged and presented will have an impact on how it is perceived and on the response that is given.

This rather obvious conclusion can take us in several directions, from which I want to select two. The first has to do with the presentation of the gospel message. We need to think about it seriously. One of our key roles as disciples is to pass on to others the gospel message recorded in His Word. It is true that God's Word is not bound, but the way in which we introduce people to it and speak of it may have a significant impact. Our attitudes, our presentation and our approach may act as a catalyst or as a barrier to further investigation.

## Eight factorial

We need to present God and His summons to mankind in such a way as to intrigue and encourage people to investigate for themselves, but without cloaking the message or pretending that it is something it isn't. This means presenting God's Word as relevant and challenging, authoritative and powerful. If people come away thinking the message is overly intellectual or overly twee, that it is too idealistic or holds no meaning for them, then it *might* be because of a mistaken emphasis in our presentation which we did not intend but could put right.

Rightly or wrongly, people will draw conclusions and make judgements from the way we present and order information, as well as from the literal content of what we say. We have been brought to know the Truth, but we also have a responsibility to try to make others see it that way. Given that ours is the most important and most true message in the whole world, it would be a pity to underplay it.

Secondly, consider our own internal communications. Both groups of maths victims had the same data and the same problem, but came to quite different conclusions because they were *led* to them. We lead one another to conclusions when we exhort, when we discuss, when we speak in business meetings, when we have quiet words over an ecclesial tea or in our homes. A huge responsibility thus falls on anyone who communicates with another where spiritual or ecclesial matters are concerned.

Think of the power of rhetoric. A skilful presenter can make a harebrained idea sound reasonable, whether through the use of cunning arguments, charismatic appeal or plain badgering of an audience. It is possible to win an argument by deceiving or outwitting one's opponent rather than by being right. Individuals can get their own ways in ecclesias because of how they present information or 'lead' an audience on to a particular conclusion. We all share the same deep love of God's Word—and in that sense the facts for all of us are the same—but we must always ensure that we are not presenting data or arguments in a particular way in order to pursue some predetermined conclusion or agenda of our own.

Mark Vincent