

Learning to read the Bible

The use of seminars in preaching

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“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

Bible seminars have proved to be a popular way of teaching people about the Bible in recent years. People attend for a variety of reasons and come from varied backgrounds. Seminars are different from lectures, and there are several points which must be borne in mind when conducting them and when deciding who will deliver them.

THE BIBLE SEMINARS appear to have been one of our most effective preaching methods in the last fifteen or more years. Such a simple question: Would you like to learn how to read the Bible? And the response from the public has been, Yes! The disappointing aspect has to be that, whilst much larger numbers attend seminars than our public addresses on a Sunday, the number who accept the gospel and come to baptism is only a small percentage of the total. However, we must remember that it is the “Spirit and the bride [that] say, Come” (Rev. 22:17); we are only the means by which God brings His message to a world in darkness. He calls whomsoever he chooses, and all have the free will to respond or turn away. This article reflects on the work of the seminars and their organisation. What is it about the seminars that draws people to attend?

Why do they come?

If the people coming are asked that question you are just as likely to get as many different answers as there are people! There are, though, a number of common factors that appear in the majority of responses that we as a community do well to heed.

First, they are nearly always (but not in every case) held initially in a neutral venue, so those coming do not feel intimidated, or threatened, or pressured. Adult Evening Class programmes in schools or community centres are good places to choose. Somewhere that does not have that ‘going to church’ feel about it is advisable, if it is being organised independently of any other activity such as evening classes.

Secondly, the literature does state that they will not be put under pressure, and there is a clear structure and programme laid out for all to see.

Thirdly, and perhaps most important of all, the whole presentation of the seminar is that it will be a ‘teaching not preaching’ exercise, which is one of the most difficult aspects for

the presenting brethren to remember sometimes.

Fourthly, they may well, of course, have individual pressures or frustrations that cause them to seek answers from the Scriptures when other remedies have not given them satisfactory respite.

Fifth and finally, they may regularly attend a church and have done so for many years, and want to improve their understanding and use of the Scriptures.

Who are they?

This writer’s experience is that they come from a wide cross-section of society, and often include many different age groups, although not many in the eighteen to twenty-five years age-group. The largest group, from experience, seems to be the forty-five to sixty-five-plus age group. It is quite likely that, within the group of eight to twenty people who attend the first course, you will have some who have no knowledge of the Bible at all and those who go to church every week and have read it regularly for many years. This latter group are often entrenched in traditional church views, and bring preconceived ideas to the seminars, which is quite natural really. Having such a mixed-ability group is quite taxing for presenters, and we will comment on that further on.

The attendees come from all walks and spheres of life. It can be quite daunting for brethren to be faced with an audience totally made up of visitors who are actually looking at the speakers, and, more importantly, listening to what is being said, with notes being written. It is, however, a very rewarding and satisfying task. The fact that they

are at the seminar in the first place is an indication that they are people 'looking for something', even if they are not sure what it is! Some come just for the first course and are then satisfied that they have achieved what they set out to do; and so, once the six or ten weeks are completed, they are not seen again. Others see the implications of what they have started to draw out from Scripture and withdraw after the first course. These are seeking to avoid that commitment that the Truth brings.

Some, of course, come just to keep a friend company or because their husband or wife wants to attend and they would rather be out than stuck indoors. Some will be those genuine seekers after truth, and we must remember this as we start each course and as we prepare and present week by week. There may also be those who are immigrants to our country, and this calls for an awareness of what their cultural background has been.

Above all, we must remember that these are people lost in the darkness of ignorance, bound up by sin and death. They are our 'neighbour', they are as we were, described by Paul in Ephesians 2:12: "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world".

How do we do it?

There is a good quantity of practical and sensible advice in both written and video/DVD format to instruct and support those undertaking the organising and presenting of seminars. The standard leaflet for billing and distribution should be put out no later than five to six weeks before the start date. If newspaper advertising is involved then this must be out two weeks before the start date to allow time for people to apply and to be responded to. Having a telephone number for people to contact is also very valuable.

The Presenters' Notes and Students' Notes plus the programme are all available, so that aspect of preparation is easily accomplished.¹ Other aspects include:

- 1 Decide on a venue, remembering that neutral territory for the first course seems to bring a better response.
- 2 When it comes to setting out the tables and chairs, avoid if possible the classroom rows. Having a square with the presenters on one side of the square works well. Layout needs to create an informal atmosphere within an

orderly presentation. Everyone needs to see the screen.

- 3 Place blank name cards on the table and get them to write their names in. As the course progresses you want to be able to ask them to do things by addressing them by their Christian/First name.
- 4 Every one needs their own ring binder/folder to keep the printed weekly notes in.
- 5 A supply of notepaper, pens or pencils is also needed.
- 6 Refreshments will be required halfway through the seminar. Unlike the American model, where they encourage participants to get up at any stage and help themselves to refreshments, most UK seminars find having a natural break halfway through, with sisters providing drinks and putting out biscuits, is the best way to proceed.
- 7 There will need to be a team comprising of: (a) presenters; (b) someone to handle the notes and keep the register, posting out notes to those who miss a week; (c) someone to do refreshments. Some ecclesias have found that, if the room has to be set out and cleared away, on each occasion it is good to have two people to do that, thus involving a wider number of ecclesia members, which is a good thing.
- 8 Equipment for the presentation these days consists of a laptop, data projector, screen and necessary power cables, with the material for the lesson (PowerPoint presentation) available to be downloaded from the ALS.¹
- 9 We are presenting a Bible seminar, so the Bible is the most important item being used. Everyone therefore needs a Bible, which preferably has centre margin references, but margin references of some sort, as they feature in the lessons.
- 10 What is most important, though, is that all class members are reading/using the same version of the Bible. This is very useful at the start of a course, where it may be necessary to quote page numbers to help students or other people find their way around Scripture.

Who should do it?

The team, or teams, that operate the seminars should be carefully selected. Not everyone is suited for this more informal approach (even if they think they are), especially in regard to

1. See <http://www.christadelphians.org/resources/seminar.htm> for notes and PowerPoint slides.

presenting. Often, comments or statements from a class member have to be ignored or dealt with by a comment such as, 'We may come back to that later', to avoid digressions and arguments that disrupt the programme. As the weeks go by the principles being expounded will become clear, and members will begin to see teachings from Scripture they have been unaware of before.

- 1 Presenters work in twos, and there is a benefit in having the same team each week, because they build relationships with the class members. However, that calls for commitment; and it may not just be for one course, it could be four or five over several years. Having a team of presenters is necessary because there will be times of sickness or work commitments that prevent someone being there. Some ecclesias have a team of four or five presenters and work a rolling rota so that always one presenter from the previous week is there to provide continuity.
- 2 Because this is 'teaching not preaching' in its presentation we should not suppose that the best platform speakers are best for presenting. Oratory is not the first prerequisite. Those who have a conversational style and are at ease sitting down when talking to the class will be well suited. Obviously a sound grasp and understanding of Scripture is necessary, as the class needs to have confidence in its teacher.
- 3 If there is a team of presenters it is important that they attend sometimes even if they are not presenting that night. If they have to stand in for someone, it is better if they already know the class members and the class knows them.
- 4 Being comfortable using PowerPoint presentations and the equipment is something that is necessary on one level, but if one presenter can handle that for both himself and the other presenter then that overcomes lack of experience or confidence.
- 5 Involving as many members of the ecclesia as possible is a good thing, although, again, a word of caution here. You do not want brethren or sisters who are going to leap in and try to 'convert' class members in the discussions that take place between individuals. As trust grows and class members have confidence in the brethren and sisters present, so will their ability to use the reasoning methods they are being taught, and they will come to understand Bible teaching.
- 6 Presenters need to spend time going over the material in advance and discussing the

evening's topics with each other, and they obviously need to get on well and be able to work together. The last thing one needs is for the presenters to have a public disagreement (over anything!). Pairings on the rota are therefore important to ensure smooth running on the night.

What happens next?

The purpose of the seminars is to bring people to a knowledge of the gospel, and ultimately for them to accept the true doctrine of Scripture that motivates one to seek repentance, forgiveness and the hope of eternal life through faith in Christ Jesus. It is the teaching of principles which have this as their goal. At this point it is necessary to comment on the original material supplied from America and the plethora of further seminar material that has sprung into existence since then.

- 1 The beginners' course, as it is termed, the first Learn To Read The Bible course, has a clearly defined theme and structure. It is built around God-manifestation, the purpose of why we exist and why God has created us. It has to be said that much of what has been produced within the UK since then is just re-hashed Sunday public lectures (and not very good ones at that). We need fewer courses but much better ones if we are to achieve the same level of interest for follow-up courses as we seem to achieve for the first course. There are a few about, but they need searching out. It is interesting that in America they have not seen the need to develop a whole range of topics for seminars.
- 2 One should also bear in mind that there is a need to pull the seminar people toward the ecclesia as soon as is sensible, rather than continuing to operate as a standalone function. Moving subsequent courses to the ecclesial hall may help in this respect.
- 3 Experience has shown that some class members will come for a number of years, happily attending at any venue. They have heard and have had written notes clearly defining all the first principles and still stay committed to their church or show no inclination to be involved with any ecclesial activity. The seminar becomes a 'club', a means to its own end, more of a social activity. This is to be avoided, and ecclesias should move on to new pastures, starting back on the first course again.
- 4 Once ecclesias are onto second or third courses they should be announcing, or giving class

members leaflets about, special efforts or events at the ecclesia they feel it would be good for them to attend.

- 5 When seminars are running they should be part of the ecclesia's Sunday announcements, letting the ecclesia know who is on that week and what topics are being covered. The seminar is an ecclesial activity, a most important one, and there is a need to let all members know what is happening.

The Word of God

There is a need in this desperate world for the stability and peace of mind that the Scriptures can bring. It has been reported by Amazon that their Bible sales have increased by twenty-five per cent for the year ending February 2009. The credit crunch, coming on top of wars and terrorism, has made people feel vulnerable and

insecure. Bringing them into contact with the Scriptures is the greatest gift we can give them. As the Apostle Paul instructed Timothy, "the holy scriptures . . . are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15); this Word of God "is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man [or woman] of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works" (vv. 16,17).

We may still find that the seminars only bring one here and one more there into the household of God, but it is His work, His Word. Putting a Bible into the hands of people who have never opened one before is to give them the key that opens the door to the Kingdom of God. We are preparing for that Kingdom age when all the world will be educated by His saints in the wonders of His Word and purpose.