

Introduction

Dear Study Group Leader,

This is Part 2 of a 3-part series intended to help young people aged 15-17 to decide the path they wish to follow in their lives. The notes in the Introduction to Part 1 summarised the purpose and content of the lessons, and discussed some of the practical issues involved in preparing and teaching them. We have not reproduced those notes here, so if you haven't read them already this may be a good time to find Part 1 and look through them.

Planning a syllabus

The CSSU does not produce a lesson timetable for the Study Class, because no two classes are the same. You may have a large group of young people who are committed to their faith, perhaps some of whom are already baptised; or you may have only one or two, for whom the distractions of the world are proving very strong. The important thing is to try to provide them with the teaching that they need.

We have tried to present the notes in a structured form, in which the topics build on what has been covered before, and to provide the young people with subjects appropriate to their age. We have also tried to strike a balance between topics which are based on scriptural subjects and those which are directly relevant to daily life (though of course every scriptural consideration should have its practical lessons, and no moral issue can be dealt with apart from the Word of God). It is therefore a perfectly acceptable approach to start at the beginning of Part 1 and work through to the end of Part 3. All we would suggest is that you consider the needs of the members of the group and provide them with what they need.

Seeking the views of the young people

It may be helpful to ask your group to comment on the topics that they would like to discuss. If you do so, their response will typically highlight two things which are uppermost in their minds:

- practical issues that they face at home, school or college.
- a desire to understand the differences between the beliefs of Christadelphians and those of other denominations and religions.

It is important to listen to their wishes and to respond to them, especially if you feel that they are genuinely seeking for help and guidance, and we hope that these notes will help you to do so: certainly those needs were in our minds.

At the same time, remember that it is often difficult, especially for young people, to stand back from their immediate situation and recognise which activities may in the long run prove most helpful. The time in a Study Class may be their best opportunity systematically to think in detail about the first principles of the gospel, and to get them straight in their minds. To do so may not only help with their immediate situation - though they may not have expected it to be so - but prepare them for the rest of their lives. Many problems which could destroy personal, family or ecclesial life, yield to a clear understanding of the gospel of salvation in Christ Jesus.

The young people can tell you what they think they need, but in the end you should feel it to be your responsibility to provide for their needs in the best way you can. If they ask for bread you should give it to them; if they want stones you should listen compassionately and then help them to understand why bread is better.

Talking with young people

We considered in the introduction to Part 1 the importance of listening to young people, gaining their trust, and of respecting the confidentiality of things they say to you. We hope that in addition you will find these thoughts helpful.

Their Questions - the best teaching aid

Imagine: you are teaching your Study Class. You prepared the lesson in great detail, considered every aspect of the subject, arranged the key points in a logical sequence, and now, with ten minutes to go before you finish, you are only half way through what you had planned to say. You pause for breath - and a small voice across the table asks a question which seems at best tangential to what you want to say: at worst,

irrelevant. Brushing it aside, you plunge on, determined that the young should absorb the enormous wealth of wisdom you have stored away over the years.

You may have missed the best teaching opportunity you had that day.

The one who asked the question probably stopped listening. After all, if you didn't listen to him, why should he listen to you. The question may have been irrelevant to the lesson, certainly to your perception of it, but it was not meaningless. It may have meant something like

- 'I do not understand what you are saying'
- 'I am not interested in this'
- 'I want to join in this discussion but I don't know how'

Next week he may have a relevant question. What will he do then, and what will he think when you complain that he will not join in the discussion?

Young people's questions are so important. They tell you of their needs, of what they do not understand, of their desire to contribute, of their need to be heard. It is true that they can be distracting, and that occasionally a question is asked deliberately in order to distract! But even then it needs to be listened to carefully, and dealt with in an appropriate way. So listen to the questions your young people ask, and take them seriously. They are gold-dust. Be prepared to

- Stop what you are saying. You may have many opportunities to finish what you want to say (perhaps they have heard it before anyway); but you have only one to respond to this question.
- Take time to think about the question, and ask yourself what is really being said. Make sure that you have understood what they are asking, perhaps by repeating the question in your own words. It may indeed turn out to be irrelevant, and you may feel it best to talk to the one who asked it at the end of the lesson, or to deal with it another time.
- Do not criticise an honest question, even if you think that the young person should know the answer (perhaps she does, but she wants to hear you give it). There may be wrong answers, but there are no wrong questions (not real questions, anyway).
- Ask the other members of the group if they have the same question, and listen to what they say.
- Give the best answer that you can, but don't be afraid to say that you do not know, or that you find the answer hard to live up to, or that you would like to think about it for a week.

Above all, show the young people that you respect their contributions to the lesson, and that you value what they have to say. By this you show that you respect and value them.

Talk about yourself, in moderation

Young people commonly regard the very old (like you) as being different from them. What would you understand of their problems and difficulties?

Who can blame them? You have probably spent many years polishing your presentation of yourself as someone who has mastered the problems of life and has everything under control. So when it comes to a discussion of something that happened on the way home from school last Thursday, which they felt unable to cope with; or a temptation that they find hard to resist; or a doubt that they have about whether there really is a God, why should they tell you? You will not understand.

You probably will, only too well. You may not, even when you were their age, have encountered precisely the same pitfalls as they; life has got harder for young people. But it would be surprising if you had no experience that was similar.

Should you tell them about it? Only you can decide, and there may be good reasons not to. But if you can, do. They may be worried about exams; tell them that you know what it's like because you worry about your job, or your cooking. They may feel guilty about something they have, or have not, done; tell them that also you often feel ashamed. They may have doubts about their faith; tell them of yours. They may not know what they want to do with their lives; tell them of a time when you did not know either. They may feel inadequate: tell them that, despite the polished presentation, you often feel a failure. In moderation, of course. You are not trying to outdo them, so that it seems that their problem is trivial; or to change the subject, so that you are talking about yourself rather than about them. You are simply joining them in their trouble, so that you can help them out of it. It is good for young people to understand that they are not alone in their problems; the very reason Christ shared our humanity was so that 'Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted'. Our aim has to be the same.

Young people need clear principles

If it is good to sympathise; it is even better to help. It is not enough simply to wallow in someone else's problem. Job's friends sat with him on the ground, but they were no help.

One of the hardest things in life is to keep our ideals clear, and our goals simple, while dealing compassionately with our own, and others', failures. It is easy to blur every edge, to colour every picture

grey, to think that because we are all mediocre God is satisfied with mediocrity. Paul wrote 'this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus'. For ourselves we need constantly to refresh our ideals, to fix once more our eyes upon Jesus, who 'for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame'. If this is true of us, it is even truer of young people. The young are great idealists, and we should be glad that they are. At the same time as life smoothes our rough corners it can wear us down, and the young can often surprise us with their clarity, and the freshness of their values.

So listen to their difficulties; understand their failures; but do not leave them there. Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry not just so that they would be better, but so that they would have strength to serve him. That has to be our aim too. To give them the vision that will lift them above their fellows, out of their weaknesses, to walk a journey that leads to Jesus Christ, their saviour. In short, to choose, and to walk, the Way of Life.

And finally ...

Please, please, let us know how you got on with these lessons. Our work is not finished when we print these books and put them in the post. What matters is that they should assist you in the real task of helping the young people in your ecclesia, and the only way we will know how well they achieve that aim is if you tell us. We have provided a comment form in the notes, but a letter or phone call would be equally welcome.

May God bless you, and the young in your care.

With love in Christ,

The Christadelphian Sunday School Union Committee