

Ugly Words, Ugly Reality

Using Discussion and Debate Effectively

by Ronald G. Davis

It is an ugly word—*schism*—and it is an even uglier reality. *Crisis* compounds the dark picture. And where *schism* and *crisis* are, *confront* must enter. Christ's church was on the line in Corinth. The question was not, "Will the church thrive in Corinth?" but "Will the church survive in Corinth?" The Christians there were letting their differences overwhelm their basic similarity: they were all sinners saved by grace. Some were using sin as a basis for division. Some were using division as an occasion for sin. Paul, by the Holy Spirit, confronted those devilish attitudes with strong words and strong authority.

The differences causing divisions in Corinth were both shallow and deep, both minor and major, both doctrinal and practical. The fulfillment of Jesus' prayer "that all of them may be one" (John 17:21) was being threatened by those divisive elements that separated and threatened to undo the Corinthian church. How could their witness to their pagan world be successful if they showed no unity through a lifestyle of holiness and love?

This was Paul's concern in the first century, and it must be ours in the twenty-first. We must be as unrelenting against disunity in the body of Christ as Paul was. A study of his two epistles to the Corinthians offers a marvelous opportunity to focus on this goal.

Differences need resolution. Doctrines need uniformity. Discussion and debate are teaching strategies that resemble the processes of such resolution and uniformity. Discussion and debate, therefore, are ideal ways to approach such themes.

Discussion is not idle rambling. Nor is it a "mutual exchange of ignorance," as one educator characterized what often happens. Discussion is a planned and prepared-for consideration of issues in which all participants are invited to share personal knowledge, experience, and insights.

Debate, likewise, needs to shed its negative image. In true debate, well-studied speakers address the two opposing sides of a topic. Debate should never consist of attacks on the opponent—only on the weaknesses of one's proposition and argument.

Christians have nothing to fear about honest discussion and debate. Standing on the right side of moral and ethical issues is the only place to be, and that is where Christians must stand. But we also need an awareness of and a familiarity with the best arguments of those who stand with the devil. Although he is "a liar and the father of lies," as Jesus said (John 8:44), he can be most persuasive.

Discussion Delights

The Corinthian letters feature marvelous blends of the kinds of doctrinal and practical elements that many individuals relish talking about. First Corinthians 7 and 8 are just such

studies, beautifully combining doctrine and life.

Paul's simple caution, "Be careful . . . that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (8:9) raises several issues. What adult could resist responding to such a proposition as this: "Stumbling-block arguments are only a thin veil used to cover legalistic faces"? Consider dividing a class into two or more groups to discuss such questions as, "To what extent should the immature influence the decisions of the mature?" "What do love and knowledge have to do with Paul's stumbling-block declaration?" "How is such inappropriate behavior a 'sin against Christ' (8:12)?" "How long should we let another's ignorance keep us from benefiting from our own knowledge?" "How far does Paul's principle, 'If _____ causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never _____,' go?"

Likewise, no matter whether your class is one of singles or couples, old or young, who can ignore a proposition such as this one from 1 Corinthians 7, "The single life is the better life"? As Paul discusses marriage, he boldly declares, "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do" (v. 8). Obvious questions surface immediately: "In what ways is the single life to be preferred?" "Is Paul stating an absolute of God or a purely personal view?" "God's design from the beginning was 'A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' (Matthew 19:5); how does Paul's teaching relate to that?" "How do some of Paul's other affirmations about marriage and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7 relate to contemporary culture?"

Discussion will enliven the class, if the questions asked are personally and culturally relevant. The teacher's task is to write the questions and to invite class members to give them some thought before the discussion takes place. Whether that is accomplished by distributing a copy of all the questions ahead of time or simply by asking various members to be "primed" to deal with one particular question, the method of preparation is unimportant. That the preparation happens is critical.

Debate Dichotomies

Debate is a form of discussion, but it is more formalized. Control is exercised over time, order of speakers, and opportunity for audience participation. Whether it involves one individual versus another or one team versus another team, debate produces a clear-cut division between the parties involved. A debate has the potential, as it unfolds, to raise some hackles. Debate, to be fully effective, needs to elicit some emotion—the emotion of strongly held belief, realizing what is at stake in peoples' lives.

A study of 1 Corinthians 13 provides an opportunity to highlight the difference between a cynical perspective and a godly one. To many in the modern world, the loving lifestyle is a foolish, even fatal, one. Think what could ensue if you divided your class into "Cynics" and "Believers" and asked them to prepare arguments for and against this proposition: "Resolved: the loving lifestyle, as beautiful as it sounds, will not work in the contemporary world!" You may want to give the class a week to prepare for this debate. Consider distributing your lesson outline to help participants in their preparation.

When the class session begins, give the two sides a brief time to meet and to compile their "arguments." Have each select a spokesperson (or two) for its position. Give each speaker a limited time (two to three minutes), alternate, allow class participation orally at the end, then summarize the issues raised and the conclusions drawn.

The role of the Spirit in daily living and in the revelation of truth has been deliberated from the first century to the present. Thus, a study of any text that includes the work of the Spirit can be a good one to employ debate. In a study of 1 Corinthians 2, such a resolution as the following could lead to an edifying debate: “The inspiration of the Spirit in the preparation of infallible documents is at the core of my faith.” Some believe that inspiration of Scripture is a fuzzy doctrine for fuzzy minds. Even more avow that infallibility is meaningless, and thus unimportant, since we do not possess any of the original manuscripts of the New Testament.

As your class arrives for the study, hand out “Inspired” and “Uninspired” labels alternately. (Consider also distributing a list of Scriptures on the topic.) Again, let each group meet and develop its statements. This time you may want to alternate 30-second statements from the two sides, asking members to stand and be recognized before they speak. (This will work better if you seat the two groups so that they are facing each other.)

Sometimes, to encourage clarity in thinking, it is good to let groups or individuals prepare for one side, then present the other side’s arguments! (They will need a brief period of time to consider the *written* notes of the other side.)

Now take a look at 2 Corinthians 2:4-17. Which of the following resolution statements do you believe could best be debated in your class?

1. The best way to deal with troublemakers is forgiveness and encouragement.
2. Confrontation is sometimes necessary, even when it brings grief.
3. The Christian must serve as the fragrance of life to those who are saved, but as the smell of death to the unsaved (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:15, 16).

What arguments or questions would you suggest to your debaters in order to examine the statement to be debated? How would you organize the classroom and the procedure for your debate?

The Corinthian church could be characterized as one with ugly words and ugly behaviors. What Paul wanted (and what God wanted) was the beauty of holiness and unity. What could be better goals for today’s church? For our church? Will we let cracks become canyons? Will we let fences become fortresses? Or will we work for that holiness and unity for which Christ prayed and died?