

## How to facilitate table discussion

*Sometimes the blurb on the back cover of a book or video distils a truth. Introducing God's marketing is a classic case with the claim that it combines 'The theology of Two Ways to Live and the sociology of a relational course.'*

*The first half of the slogan is clear. Dominic Steele's course is a high-speed helicopter dash over the terrain of the Bible. Each week we land on a new peak. The logic of the Bible is laid bare in the 'Two Ways to Live' manner.*

*The second half of the slogan may be less familiar. The talk/eat/group structure of a relational course has been a major driver of its success as an evangelistic series for non-Christians: the small groups allow people investigating Christianity to see what relationship with God feels like. Inside eight weeks they should know that Christians love each other... and their guests. The guests can, in a sense, try before they buy.*

*The small group is a safe place for people to say what they really think and, yet, to be accepted. The group is a safe place for guests to test out the ideas from the talk, or to toy with what it might be like to agree with them. A safe place to reveal vulnerability. A safe place to be genuine.*

*Introducing God works because its group leaders keep quiet, steering the conversation gently on to the subject of the talk. They are less concerned with correcting guests than assisting them to explore that night/day's issues. By keeping quiet, group leaders answer the two biggest fears our guests have about an evangelistic course: that they will be ear-bashed and not accepted.*

*Listening is a great evangelistic tool. The book of James advises us 'Be quick to listen and slow to speak' (James 1:19). It is hard to be a good listener in evangelism, but the guest at an Introducing God meeting has had a lot of solid Christian information in the talk. Being talked at or lectured to is rare outside of university. In our Australian culture, most guests will want to do a lot of talking in response.*

*It is our job to give them space to do just that. We should keep our interventions short. We should try active listening, shaping our comments as responses to what our guests say. A couple of sentences should be the most we need to say.*

*Our questions and comments should be 'open', so that our guests will keep talking. By 'open' I mean questions or comments that allow a range of responses, rather than conversation-stopping comprehension-test type questions. Be prepared to ask follow-up questions to help a guest explain their point - even if you don't agree with it.*

*If our guests truly experience being heard, they are much more likely to want to come back the following week to hear Dominic again. If we talk at length, we may win the argument but lose the war. Our task is to be patient, long-suffering, and very interested in what our guests have to say.*

*The reward for a Christian leader who says only a little in the first few weeks will be a group demanding answers to their questions in the second half of the course. By then, the group really wants to know what you think. And, by then, it is right to give full (but still pithy) answers. It becomes a great opportunity to partner the speaker in evangelism.*

*There are some special cases. A strong personality among the guests may need their own minder, or an offer to discuss their point fully at some other time, or a promise that it will come up in a future session. More common is the Christian who wants to put their view (right or wrong) at length. In either case, the airtime must be given back to the non-Christians. Some Christians will find this sort of evangelism very difficult. That's fine. There are lots of ways to evangelise, and not enough of any of them gets done.*

*A group of shy or depressed people may require you to talk more than usual. Try to tell stories: how you might have struggled with the issues Dominic is talking about. Use an example from current affairs. Be ready to pause mid-story if a guest starts to talk.*

*In summary: relax. Really listen and follow up the guests' comments. Steer the conversation back to the talk, from time to time. Two great questions are 'What really struck you about the talk?' and 'What do you think Dominic got wrong?'*

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