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What's a 'dialogue meeting'? It's one of those old jargon terms for a meeting arranged so that a single Christian speaker can discuss (dialogue) the claims of Christ with a group of non-Christians without too many Christians butting in. Perhaps these days we would call it a forum or consultation. In fact, it's more like a press conference, where one person gets to say his or her bit before being fried by the assembled listeners.

Whatever we call it, it seems to be a good way of giving people a chance to hear the gospel in a context where they are welcome to ask questions and make comments. In my experience, this style of meeting has provided tremendous opportunities for the gospel. Not all of the dialogue meetings I have been part of have worked well (for many different reasons), but the ones that have worked were among the best evangelistic encounters I've had.

The following are some thoughts on the nuts and bolts of running one of these meetings. They are given to encourage you to try it out in your own setting. Perhaps you might even drop The Briefing a line and let us know the results.

### Aims of a Dialogue Meeting

- i. To see people saved;
- ii. To show people that there are good reasons to believe in and follow Jesus;
- iii. To get out alive at the end of the meeting.

### Planning the Meeting

The best environment for this kind of directed discussion is one where people are relaxed, at least a little familiar with each other, and don't feel like they will be shown up as stupid if they open their mouths. To achieve this, it is important that there not be too many Christians at the meeting. A good rule of thumb is that only Christians who are bringing guests ought to turn up to the meeting. Venues which I have seen to work well include: BBQs at people's homes, lunchtime 'tutorial-style' groups at schools and universities, and meetings in clubs or halls.

### Ground Rules for Speakers and Organisers

1. Remember the aims
  - Someone else will have done the really hard work of inviting their friends to this meeting. They may have put their friendship on the line. We must be good ambassadors for the gospel and not disappoint these Christian people, or alienate their friends unnecessarily. This means making sure the gospel is actually proclaimed, but done so in a way that recognises and responds to the real questions guests may have.
2. Before the Meeting
  - The Christians who are attending should be told in advance that they must keep

quiet during the formal part of the meeting and let the speaker field the questions and control the discussion. You might arrange one person to 'prime the pump' with an appropriate question to start with, if there is a prolonged deathly silence, but otherwise the message is: shut up!

- You may detect some emphasis on this point. Well-meaning Christians giving long and complicated answers, quoting from the King James Bible, and leading discussion into controversial areas, can destroy a meeting. The whole social dynamics of the meeting depends on conversation flowing between questioners and speaker. If people jump in with answers or points of clarification, this atmosphere of open discussion can be destroyed.
- Arrange a tension-breaking activity, such as supper, so that the meeting can be broken at the right time. It is useful if this activity involves getting up and walking somewhere, since this gives people a social breathing space. It also allows Christians to chat with their guests. This activity might occur during the meeting or at its conclusion – your call.
- The arrangement of the room is important. People need to be able to see the speaker, and possibly each other, in order to encourage interaction. However, the speaker also needs to think about where he or she will sit/stand, in order that it is possible to keep control over proceedings.

### 3. The Speaker's Role

- It can be useful to have someone else introduce the speaker. This clearly gives 'control' of the meeting to the speaker, which can be a handy psychological advantage should it be a fiery affair!
- The speaker should begin with the following:
  - i. a clear statement of the aims of the meeting. e.g. "Today I would like to try to show you that there are good reasons for believing that the Christian faith is true" or "Tonight I'm presenting you with the reasons for why we should follow Jesus";
  - ii. an indication that this is a dialogue meeting and that you will welcome any questions on the Bible or the Christian faith;
  - iii. an honest, but not overly apologetic, statement to the effect that you don't claim to have all the answers, but you do know the answers that the Bible can give on many of the big questions about Christianity which people have;
  - iv. a clear statement of the 'rules' of the meeting. These will differ from event to event, but one I have found very useful in avoiding uncontrollable 'bun fights' is that questions and answers are to be addressed first to the speaker. Guidelines such as these are probably most necessary in youth group or university contexts (although things

can still get pretty rough in the retirement home lounge room!).

- To set the agenda for the discussion give a short simple gospel presentation. This should be no more than about five minutes. It is good if you can use some sort of visual aid as well, as this will help people think of questions during the meeting. Tailor your talk to the group: do they need a simple gospel outline such as Two Ways To Live, or are they a group that might think they “know all that” and therefore need a surprising angle on the subject? Don’t be afraid to leave a few ends dangling, since this will encourage questions.

#### 4. Question Time

- It can seem like an age before someone asks the first question following the talk. This is a courage-testing time; learn to wait. 10 seconds of silence won’t hurt, and someone will eventually pipe up. If things get desperate, your host can ask the ‘primer question’ that you have pre-arranged.
  - People are much more likely to listen to you if you answer questions with sincerity, empathy, and gentleness.
  - It is sometimes good to answer a question with a question. This gives you time to think, but it will also help you to begin to understand what the questioner really wants to know or what their real agenda might be.
  - Always make it clear that you are giving the Bible’s answer on some subject, or that this is what Jesus taught and not your own personal views on religion. If people want to get angry, try to show them their problem is with Jesus, not with you.
  - Avoid religious jargon as you explain penal, substitutionary atonement by which Christ redeemed us and thus propitiated the wrath of God. Think twice about the words you use; some words that we take for granted are increasingly foreign to those outside the church. e.g. ‘New Testament’, even ‘gospel’.
  - If you don’t know how to answer a question, you have a few options:
    - i. fake a nausea attack and leave the room (probably not the best option!!);
    - ii. ask a clarifying question. It may be that there hasn’t been proper communication; it will also give you time to think;
    - iii. pass the question over to another Christian in the group who you think might have something to say (in rugby circles, this is known as the ‘hospital pass’);
    - iv. if you genuinely can’t answer an important question, offer to find out the answer and get back to them in the next few days;
- a. if you have prepared well, you will have something to say on most questions. It could be that the question being asked is irrelevant or minor. Be prepared to politely throw out the question, if you feel this is the case. e.g. “I suspect that’s not a pressing issue for many of

us; let's move on and see if any of our discussion answers what you are asking".

- As you answer questions take every opportunity to subtly or blatantly bring discussion back to the person of Jesus. In the end it is Jesus they must make a decision about. The decision about Jesus is the cutting edge of the Gospel.