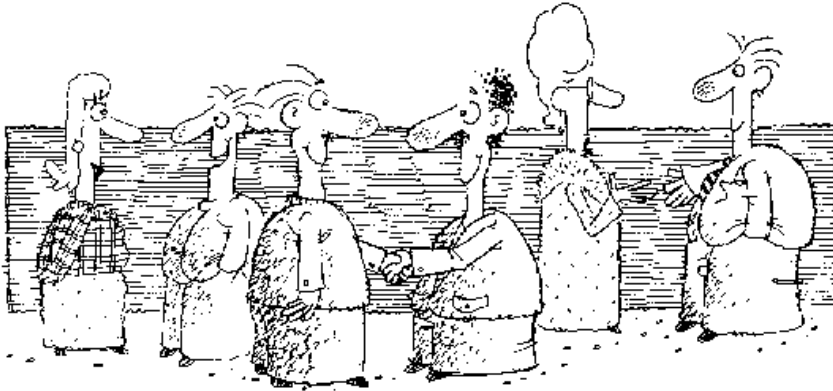


Food for Life

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'Would you be interested in coming to an evangelistic Ferrero Rocher party?' These were the words (in Italian) of one character to another on a leaving card given to me by some students last week. (For the uninitiated, 'Ferrero Rocher' is a famous brand of Italian chocolates.) The card was an amusing reminder of the many evangelistic supper parties (ESP) and evangelistic Bible studies (EBS) which I've held with students over the last few years as well as a pointer to the future work I hope to do in Italy with students there. I've been asked to write a little about the how and why of evangelistic supper parties and Bible studies, so here goes.

Unlike students in many other parts of the world, British students are often indifferent to the gospel: they see Christianity as utterly irrelevant to their lives and won't naturally engage in conversations about it. However, such people will often come to an evangelistic supper party - sometimes simply because of the free meal or sometimes because of their friendship with the host. An ESP can be a turning-point for them as the talk and discussion can shatter their mistaken ideas about Christianity, and God begins to create in them a compelling interest in Christ and the gospel.

Similarly, people who refuse to come to a normal evangelistic talk because they fear the emotion and pressure of being in a big meeting or are afraid of losing face with their friends will often come to an ESP because it involves less loss of face and they feel less ill at ease in a discussion in which non-Christians are in the majority. And of course a meal provides a relaxed setting in which to discuss spiritual things. (Look at how often Jesus met with people over a meal, eg Matthew 9:9-13).

For some non-Christian students God uses an ESP as a bridge to lead them from indifference to a desire to explore Christianity. After the FSP their Christian friends find that some of them have a new openness and they respond more positively to invitations to other evangelistic meetings.

So what happens at an ESP? I'll describe an ideal scenario as it works in the British culture. (It's rarely quite this ideal!)

If a couple of Christian students are organising the ESP it's good if a few of their Christian friends pray during the ESP (and help with the cooking and washing up).

I arrive early to meet and pray with the students hosting the evening. At a recent ESP the host greeted me with the words: 'Anne, I'm so nervous. (That's normal. At this point the hosts are wondering why on earth they ever organised it, are sure nobody will take part in the discussion and fear that by the end of the evening they'll have lost all their non-Christian friends.)

I try to calm their nerves a little and then I'm introduced to the guests as they arrive. The non-Christians are usually fairly nervous about what's going to happen so it's important that the food is served quickly as its appearance helps British people to relax. Over the meal I try to have a general conversation with everyone so that we've established some rapport and trust before we go on to talk about spiritual things.

Once the meal is over the host gets everyone quiet and hands over to me. I explain what will happen: 'I'll give a short talk about Christianity and then it's over to you to ask questions, disagree, express your viewpoint. If nobody wants to talk I won't drag it out.'

I usually give a humorous introduction, to put everyone at their ease. I go on to talk about how often people reject Christianity on the basis of bad Sunday School or religious education lessons without ever investigating Christianity as adults. I give some amusing caricatures of what people think it means to be a Christian and then explain what it really means in terms of a relationship with Christ.

Then I speak for some time about Jesus, eg why he was such a shock to the religious people and how he related to sinful people. I explain the gospel and some of Jesus' claims and then invite people to respond in open discussion.

Often these discussions last for hours, and at midnight the non-Christians will make comments such as, 'I'd intended to sneak away after 10 minutes but it was really interesting.' Or 'This is the best discussion I've had for months'.

Discussions are as varied as those who come. Sometimes they are very much at the intellectual level; sometimes they are deeply personal and there are opportunities for us Christians to share deeply about the ways Cod has helped us. It can be costly to make ourselves so vulnerable.

As I begin to speak, people often won't meet my eyes and are rather nervous. Gradually they start to give me stealthy glances of curiosity and by the end of my talk are often looking straight at me and listening intently.

Sometimes during the meal I'm intimidated by the apparent hardness of the guests and have to force myself not to dilute my talk (especially the section on sin). Often when it comes to the discussion I'm amazed at how responsive the apparently hard students are to the message.

When we finally finish it's often the time for significant personal conversations. If I drive people home the last person may sit talking to me in the car for a long time.

I'm convinced that ESPs are among the most effective methods of evangelism among students at British universities today but I have to work fairly hard to convince my students of that. Sadly, a fair number of British Christian students come to university more concerned about finding a cosy group of Christian friends than about making any non-Christian friends, so when I first talk to them about ESPs and EBSs the response is usually polite lack of interest: they can't imagine it working with the non-Christians they know. But as I share stories of recent ESPs in individual conversations, in Bible study leader training, in prayer meetings and in main meetings, interest is gradually aroused.

Training students for evangelistic supper parties

I begin my training for evangelistic supper parties by looking at examples of how Jesus relates to people. We discuss what it means to be a friend and what friendship evangelism is. I set ESPs in this context and stress the importance of prayer and a holy life.

Then I give the students some practical tips. Most of them sound obvious but many ESPs have been marred because they have not been followed properly.

- **Where will it be held?** Usually in a student's room or a flat. It could be an informal supper where we all sit around on the floor, or a proper meal around the table.
- **Whom to invite.** The non-Christians will feel less intimidated and more free to speak honestly if they're in the majority. Between four and twelve is probably a good number. Usually several people who accepted invitations don't come after all so it's good to invite more rather than fewer people.

It's unwise to make extreme combinations of people (eg people from other faiths together with humanists and atheists) as their questions are often too different to keep them all interested in the discussion. Having said that I once led an excellent ESP with a group of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. The topic I was given to speak on was the uniqueness of Christianity!

- **How to invite people** This is often done very badly so we discuss it in some detail. It's crucial to invite friends in good time and then to remind them nearer the event. (We're so nervous about the ESP that we think of little else for the two weeks beforehand whereas our non-Christian friends often forget about it five minutes after receiving the invitation.) The key is often to meet up with people beforehand and bring them along rather than assume they'll turn up. Sometimes written invitations are useful.

It's important that the guests invited should understand exactly what they're coming to. British people will not be pleased if a 'religious talk' is sprung on them without warning.

- **The food.** Anything attractive. I've attended innumerable pizza and baked potato parties. In a hall of residence or hostel where food is provided and cooking facilities are limited a 'pudding party' following the evening meal can sometimes work.
- **Washing-up.** Decide in advance what will happen about the washing-up so

that the non-Christians don't use it as an excuse to 'escape' from the discussion into the kitchen.

- **We chat about how to introduce me.** If we don't I am sometimes introduced in a way that makes little sense to the guests, such as: 'This is Anne. She works for UCCF.'
- **Resources.** Have Gospels and Christian books ready to offer people at the end of the evening.
- **When can evangelistic supper parties be held?** Anytime: as a sequel to freshers' week, in the lead-up to a mission, as follow-up to a mission for interested non-Christians to ask their remaining questions; at any time during the term. They can be held as afternoon tea parties or early evening supper parties during a mission. This means the discussion is usually fairly brief but the great advantage is that non-Christians who come to the ESP with no intention of attending the evening mission talk find themselves becoming interested during the ESP and then come along to the mission talk after all.

The Christian students are often astounded at how well the discussion goes and I encourage them to follow it up with an evangelistic Bible study in which their friends can find out about Christianity and the gospel in some depth by reading and discussing extracts from the Gospels.

Evangelistic Bible Studies

I consider a series of evangelistic Bible studies a vital method of evangelism in 20th century Britain. Many non-Christians know so little about Christianity that they need to build up a picture of the gospel gradually: one evangelistic talk may arouse their interest but not give them sufficient information on which to make a decision about Christianity.

There are other advantages too.

- The heart of Christianity is Jesus Christ. If we read and discuss extracts from the Gospels with our friends we can introduce them to the Person who is central to Christianity. This often means that discussions with friends about Christianity focus less on peripheral things and irrelevancies and more on Christ and the gospel. This can be an advantage over an ESP.
- As our friends read the Gospels they see for themselves that they have wrong ideas about Christianity. It is much better for them to be corrected by reading Scripture than by our pointing out their mistakes.
- During a talk at a big meeting there isn't much opportunity for people to express their doubts and questions and have them answered. An EBS provides the perfect opportunity for this -especially if one ensures that non-Christians are in the majority.
- Some people who refuse to go to a big meeting will come to a small-scale discussion with friends.
- An EBS sets a good pattern for people when they become Christians. They have already learnt that we get to know God and how he wants us to live through studying the Bible.

- Close relationships usually develop between the members of the EBS which makes the nurturing of new Christians so much easier.

Training students for Evangelistic Bible Studies

When I am training students to lead evangelistic Bible studies we look at what the Bible claims about itself:

1. Ethesiains 6 : 17 ... **the sword of the Spirit**, which is the word of God.
2. Hebrews 4: 12 For the word of God is **living and active**. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; **it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart**.
3. 1 Peter 1:23-25 **For you have been born again**, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, **through the living and enduring word of God**. For, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands for ever.'

I encourage them to pray that the Holy Spirit will use Cod's Word like a sword cutting into people's lives. I illustrate how I've seen this happen by telling them of one international student who came to a series of evangelistic Bible studies we ran during a special outreach to language students. He came along to the first one just to practise his English but within 10 minutes found himself fascinated by Jesus. He spent the whole day looking forward to the evening when he could come and read more about Jesus.

- It is good to look at the Gospels with our friends because many of them know so little about Jesus Christ. As they read about him they are often drawn to him, and antagonism, lack of interest, and some questions about Christianity (eg doubts about the authenticity of the Bible) often melt away.
- As people read Jesus' teaching they can find out about Christianity in depth and see the implications of following Jesus. They are therefore less likely to make an impetuous, emotional decision. I well remember two students telling me that they went home from one EBS late at night and then stood on the pavement for an hour discussing what would have to change in their lives if they became Christians and whether or not they were prepared to accept the cost.

As with evangelistic supper parties I find it important to spend time discussing with students how they'll invite people. I ask them how they'd feel if a Marxist friend on their corridor invited them to a Marxist discussion group. As we discuss the fears of looking ignorant, of being in a minority, of feeling pressured etc, we consider how we can allay the same fears that our friends might feel in coming to an EBS. I encourage them to be considerate, for example, using page numbers rather than chapter and verse references to locate passages being studied. I well remember the embarrassment of a PhD student who, having been given a Bible, and told we were looking at Luke, began searching through Genesis, Exodus etc in a desperate attempt to find this unknown book.

I caricature the apologetic invitation and encourage them to be enthusiastic as they invite friends: they're not inviting them to read some dreary book and discussions are usually exciting. It's important students clearly explain to their

friends what will happen so they don't think it's just a philosophical discussion and get a shock when a Gospel is put in their hands. We also discuss how to respond if their friends ask, 'Are you trying to convert me?' or say that they don't believe the Bible.

I supply them with a list of suggested passages from the Gospels. I encourage them to work through a Gospel - one week looking at some of Jesus' teaching (eg a parable), the next week looking at Jesus' encounter with an individual and always leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection in the final weeks. My favourite Gospel for EBS purposes is Luke with its stress on grace and Jesus' concern for individuals, especially outcasts.

Then we discuss how to prepare the EBS and look at a passage together. I run through the usual points about preparing a Bible study (observation, interpretation and application) and encourage them to identify with the characters and their interactions, feelings and motivation.

I encourage them to read the passage as though they've never read it before and to identify which things might be incomprehensible to non-Christians and which things they think they understand whilst actually misunderstanding them (eg some British non-Christians would think they understood the word 'sin' but would actually see it as referring only to actions such as rape, murder, theft).

I find it important to spend time discussing with the Christians how they'd help their friends to understand these concepts. (I remember at one EBS I asked a question about what sin is and a Christian answered, 'falling short of the glory of God'. It didn't mean a lot to the non-Christians present!)

One of the main aims of an EBS is to help our friends see what Jesus was like and who he is. When using the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus does not make so many clear, high Christological claims, it is important always to ask what Jesus' actions and words imply about who he is (eg Luke 14:26, 27, 33).

I stress the importance of using a good commentary (eg, the Tyndale series and, for Luke's Gospel, Kenneth Bailey's Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes). Non-Christians can ask penetrating questions. It doesn't matter if we can't answer some of them, but it does matter if we can't answer any of them. We discuss how to convey the information from commentaries in an interesting and helpful way.

We summarise the main points of the passage and then I remind them that an EBS isn't a talk. The leader's role isn't to tell people what the text means but to ask questions which will enable them to discover for themselves what it means. We discuss possible questions and illustrations.

Then we discuss certain practicalities of leading the EBS - how to make people feel at ease; whether or not to pray at the beginning; not to use a marked Bible if Muslims are present; what to do with any Christians present. (Don't let Christian students dominate. Often just as a promising discussion is developing they'll cross-reference to Leviticus or raise an issue of no interest to non-Christians.)

It's often a good idea to prepare and lead an EBS in pairs. We discuss how that can work. Often a new Christian has more non-Christian friends and a better understanding of how non-Christians think, so it's ideal for them to team up with an older Christian with a greater grasp of the Christian faith.

I stress that non-Christians often need to hear the same spiritual truth in the course of several evangelistic Bible studies before they understand it; that it's not essential to get the whole gospel across every week; that it's vital to listen a lot in the first half of the EBS - once people have said what they think, they're better able to listen to you; the importance of asking them questions about what you've tried to explain so that you can find out what they've actually understood.

Preparing and leading evangelistic Bible studies, and training others to do them, has been one of the highlights of my time as a staffworker. Perhaps the most rewarding context in which I have done this was on a two-week outreach team where I spent an hour every morning with some of the team preparing a passage from Luke's Gospel for the evening EBS. One student said to me at the end of the fortnight: 'I feel I've understood Luke's Gospel for the first time.' I think that would be the testimony of many Christian and non-Christian students who have got involved in evangelistic Bible studies.

Anne Webster has just completed a 4½ year term as universities Travelling Secretary in the south-east of England. She moves on from UCCF to join the staff team of the GBU in Italy later this year.

Bibliography

For further help on preparing evangelistic Bible studies, see:

Anna Johnston, Who do you say I am?: An introduction to Evangelistic Bible Study (UCCF, Leicester, 1986)

Ada Lum, How to Begin an Evangelistic Bible Study (Downer's Grove, USA: InterVarsity Press, 1971)

The original inspiration for the British evangelistic supper party came from Rebecca Manley Pippert's booklet, Pizza Parlor Evangelism (IVCF-USA, 1976, 1978, originally published in HIS magazine)

Commentaries on Luke's Gospel:

Kenneth E Bailey, Poet and Peasant (Grand Rapids, USA: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976) and Through Peasant Eyes (Grand Rapids, USA: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980). Also published in a combined edition, 1983

David Gooding, According to Luke (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press/Grand Rapids, USA: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987)

Michael Wilcock, The Message of Luke (Leicester, England/Downer's Grove, USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Have you ever noticed how often the Lord Jesus opens up a serious conversation about spiritual things around a meal table?

In Luke's Gospel alone, notice 5:29-39; 7:36-50; 11:37-53; 14:1-24; 22:14-38; 24:28-35.

Apparently, in first-century Palestine, it was common for groups of interested people to have a meal together for religious study. They would study the Torah and sometimes continued into the night when they warmed to their discussions (Bailey: Through Peasant Eyes, p 3).

What is the most appropriate context in your culture for discussion of matters of importance? How could you develop this as a means of informal evangelism among students?

In the Middle East of Jesus's day, we are told, 'to invite a man to a meal was an honour ... sharing a table meant sharing life ... Thus Jesus' meals with the publicans and sinners ... are an expression of the mission and message of Jesus ... The inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, achieved in table-fellowship, is the most meaningful expression of the message of the redeeming love of God.' (Jeremias: New Testament Theology, New York, Scribner, 1971, p 115f. Quoted in Bailey: Poet and Peasant, pp 142-3).

To invite someone for a meal may not have quite the same significance in your culture. In what other ways can Christians best express their love and concern for unbelieving friends and convey the message of God's love?