

ECCLESIA STUDY

Brother Jerry Leslie

(The brethren in Phoenix, Arizona had a convention over the Thanksgiving Day period, 1979. On Sunday there was a special feature entitled “How to Study.” Jerry Leslie had the first hour and gave a very meaty discourse on “Ecclesia Study.” Brother Leslie has kindly given us permission to use his notes and we urge a careful study of his discourse, especially on the part of elders. Brother Tabac of Chicago had the second hour and gave a fine discourse on “Personal Study.” The Phoenix brethren prepared a complete booklet of Brother Tabac’s talk and each conventioneer was welcome to take a copy for further study. The booklet prepared by the Phoenix brethren comprised 44 pages, bound in black cover.)

We call ourselves “Bible Students.” The name has greater significance than that we read the Scriptures, or that we even believe them. It means we search them for understanding to nourish the spiritual life and growth. Deut. 11:18: “Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes.” Jer. 15:16: “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart; for I am called by thy name, O Lord God of Hosts.” John 5:39: “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me.” Rom. 15:4: “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”

The **purpose** for Ecclesia study is mutual **helpfulness**—to help and to be helped. We do not think it is the primary role of Elders to **preach**. That which we hear alone we most easily forget; and those things we participate in are more deeply impressed. So our motive in our studies is to **edify** one another as well as to be instructed in the Most Holy Faith.

We might begin by mentioning a few of the types of studies we have: **1.** Question Meetings. **2.** Berean Topical Studies from the Volumes. **3.** Bible Studies—a Chapter or book at a time. **4.** Topical studies outlined by the leaders.

As to the first we think it would be very helpful for a class to periodically select a subject and submit questions to be compiled and redistributed, or the leader may make up the questions himself. Then during the study to ask for thoughts from the brethren, with the leader summarizing the expressions and giving his own best judgments.

The idea of questions from the class has the advantage of revealing the areas needing clarification, especially as respects principles. They also give the brethren an opportunity

to probe areas not normally covered in Volume studies. Consider the Question: “What is the ‘first love’ of Rev. 2:4?” Or “When and how comprehensive is ‘Jacob's Trouble’” or “Why did Jesus heal and preach to Gentiles yet restrict his disciples to do so?” Such Questions may sit in the back of the minds of the brethren and cause some concern until vented at Question meetings.

Berean Studies on the other hand should focus on a continuing subject from week to week. Volume Six, page 325, par. 2: “These are not merely reading circles, but a systematic study of the divine plan in all its phases, taken up item by item. The several volumes of Studies in the Scriptures treating the subjects, as they do, in a connected and consecutive order, constitute (with the Bible) text books for these Bible studies; but in order to the profit of these classes it is necessary that the leader and the class should clearly differentiate between **reading and studying**. So far as the reading is concerned, all of the dear friends can as well, or perhaps better, do their reading by themselves at home. The object of these studies is to take up a certain portion of each topic as presented in one or more paragraphs, and discuss it thoroughly between themselves, calling up collateral passages of Scripture, etc., and thoroughly ventilating the matter, and, if possible, getting each member of the class to give an expression of his thought respecting the particular matter under consideration, proceeding then to the next topic.”

Reprint 1900: This kind of study “accustoms each one to think for himself, and to study to arrange his conceptions of the truth in harmony with all the Scripture statements bearing thereon, and also to express to others the truth which he sees.”

Reprint 5364: As for Bible Study brethren, from the period of the Nicene creed to the reformation, there was no Bible study except that which was done in secret, for fear of persecution. Only in the last 100 years have Bible Students begun to explore its depths without the fear of men.

We feel that such studies would be best served by considering a chapter or book at a time, and having before the brethren an outline of the main theme or principles, some guidelines for interpretation and references from the Volumes and Reprints for all to consider. Before considering any **private interpretation** or nominal commentary, a clear view of the **Harvest Message** should be presented and supportive references sought to harmonize with what we have already learned. For some time the Portland class enjoyed a Revelation study in this vein and found many sources in the Towers and Volumes on the subject.

Other topical studies can be best achieved with a **short subject** outlined by the leader suggesting various scriptures, questions and references designed to last 1, 2, 3 or 4 meetings. Our class recently had one on “ecclesia elections” in this fashion. Subjects like the Sin Offering, Jubilee, Covenants can be covered in this way; while they

otherwise would be put off if the class were in another portion of the Volumes at the time. Practical subjects can be considered such as “being on time” for meetings, “regularity,” “personal discipline,” etc. We believe it essential to have a variety of subjects considered by an ecclesia, and not to specialize on the Tabernacle alone or just Volume I, but to cover all the Volumes over a period of time, to consider Bible and Reprint studies covering both doctrinal and character subjects.

Let me offer some suggestions on how we can best contribute. (Incidentally if there is a small group, a table could be used for the spreading out of study books. These studies should be informal and relaxed.) First on preparation: Do background reading beforehand. Bring current articles or news references, or scripture or examples from history as suits the lesson. Be ready to share examples from your own life if appropriate. Especially bring specific questions. Bring your books and especially your **presence of mind** on the subject. There is nothing so frustrating to a leader or boring to the class as to have brethren unprepared on the study. It is less up to the leader to make a study interesting than the brethren attending.

We as students can learn together if we all come prepared to contribute something. So said Paul: (1 Cor. 14:26), “How is it then brethren? When ye come together every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.” Incidentally we would say here if you are not prepared as you feel you should be, don’t feel you should stay away from meeting. Come anyway. It is the flesh and the adversary that will tell us we are not good enough, that we should stay home. Brethren we need the fellowship and stimulation of fellow minds and hearts. Heb. 10:24, 25: “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works; not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

Also in the area of preparation, we would suggest if you are aware of a **sensitive issue** or question, approach the leader beforehand. Ask him to present the question for you, or at least prepare him for your point or ask counsel on how to present it. “Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things.” (Gal. 6:6.) The learning process works best in a **relaxed**, deliberate environment. We all tend to react to **surprises**.

Along this same line some comment on **study participation** is in order. Not only bring your questions and supportive references, but **share** them. We think that many times brethren are silent, thinking their question or comment is foolish, or they are the only ones who do not understand. In reality, if you don’t understand, likely there are others also. It is the same with references. If they have been helpful to you, it is likely they will be helpful to others. Maybe they never considered your text in the light of the current discussion. If you have doubts as to the appropriateness of a reference, you can say,

“Does this text seem to fit our discussion?” and then present it for **review**. It is this kind of **cross-reference** thinking that keeps our own studied viewpoints in balance.

While we encourage all to comment and participate, don't monopolize. Try to express a complete thought that can be understood by all. Then having spoken your mind on a point, try not to get involved in a reaction or rebuttal. Sometimes the more defensive one becomes the effect is to invite challenge and criticism. Besides we don't want to be drawn into arguing a point unless we are totally able to defend it, and needs defending. None of us like to argue the Truth. This never encourages love for it, but resentment. State your best understanding and then let the power of Truth be its own defense. Also be prepared to be persuaded if aspects are brought to your attention you had not considered before. “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.” (James 3:17.)

Here are some suggestions for good involvement in the studies: If you cannot find a thought in Brother Russell's writings, use other commentaries or writings. Look for something to harmonize with the plan. I have found some of the most complete and spiritual explanations of Psalm 23 and Songs of Solomon in other writings. Though of course my primary material is still the harvest message. Organize your own notes for future reference. Ask questions. Try to memorize Scripture texts and references. Practice truth principles just for their inherent truthfulness, even where you cannot measure much fruitage or recognition. “Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth.” (Psalm 60:4.)

Finally, there should be an openness in our use of the truth, expressing our views, honestly weighing the criticism of those who are also seeking to know and live the truth. R. L. Wysong, who wrote “*The Creation-Evolution Controversy*” says, “One has a basis for his faith, or he does not. A faith built upon a solid rational foundation invites criticism and welcomes refinement; faith built upon a bubble jealously protects itself from the ravages of attack for fear it may burst. If truth is our goal, why not open our views to close scrutinization? If we have the truth, our views will stand, if we don't let them fall.”

The attaining and maintaining of truth must be done in the spirit of liberty. We must always grant others what we would ask for ourselves. Brother Russell published a classical piece from the *N.Y. Examiner* on Reprint page 203 on Christian Liberty. It is very short and worth reading in its entirety.

Christian Liberty

“The true doctrine is not our right to think for ourselves, but the right of the other man to think for himself.”

The impression very widely prevails that the battle for Christian liberty has been fought and won. So far as regards precaution of the more active kind, this is the case in the larger part of the civilized world. The right of the minority to free speech and free action in the line of conscientious conviction, is, in theory, at least, conceded.

But it is a mistake to assume that because harsh laws have been softened, human nature has been radically changed. The grosser forms of persecution have disappeared, but subtler forms remain. The intolerant spirit has survived the death of many institutions by which intolerance was once manifested. Christian liberty is still, in a considerable degree, conceded only in theory. Men still endeavor to punish those who have the temerity to differ from them.

There is no cause for astonishment at this manifestation of inconsistency. It is one of the curious things in human history to see how generally the persecuted have become in turn the persecutors the moment the power was lodged in their hands. And why? Because the principle of Christian liberty had not been grasped, and to this day apprehended by only a few. The right of any body of men to differ from others has always been claimed by them; there is no novelty in that. From the beginning, every Christian sect that has arisen has vehemently contended for its right to differ from others. It has protested against persecution that is to say, the persecution of itself by others. But in few cases has any sect conceded the right of others to differ from it, or forbore to persecute when it had the power. And in our own day each man is prompt to claim and assert the right to think for himself, but how loath most are to concede the equal right of all other men to think for themselves. Everyone resents any attempt to coerce him into the avowal of anything that he does not honestly believe, but how few fail to attempt to coerce others.

The true doctrine of Christian liberty is not our right to think for ourselves, but the right of the other man to think for himself. There is no danger now that our right will not be insisted upon and enforced, particularly if our thinking happens to fall in with that of the majority. It is the other man's liberty that is in danger, particularly if he is in the minority. It is his liberty that demands defense at all hazards; for, if liberty is denied him, how long will it be conceded to us?

To demand liberty for the other man, even when he differs from us, is not to admit that truth and error are essentially one, or to deny that it is of great consequence what the other man believes and teaches. It may be our duty to oppose with all our might what he teaches, to denounce it as a deadly error: but this may be done without identifying the man with what he teaches, and without the display of the spirit of intolerance and persecution. We need not try to make the man odious because his opinion is odious to us. To be loyal to the truth, and yet faithfully to recognize the equal rights of men to free thought and free speech, is not always an easy task. The two may, however, be combined. And nothing can be more certain than the preservation of Christian liberty for any if conditioned on the concession of that liberty for all.”—*N.Y. Examiner*.

Where Christians rally to the defense of a doctrine which they are unable to define Scripturally, much less demonstrate or prove—they often attempt to maintain its credibility and protect their own insecurity by the suppression of criticism.

Each must find truth for himself, to make it his own. Another cannot think for us. We will not get into the Kingdom on another's good judgment. Fear paralyzes. Let us make sure we do not rationalize others into error only to support the truth of our own position. A class study should be a forum where we can all gather and present information for the learning process, but not a court to dictate conclusions. From time to time we should be able to say, "I appreciate the comments but as yet I don't understand the matter in this light. I would like to think about it some more." And then let the study move on.

One last point on participation: **Think before you speak.** Don't put forth a half thought and conclude by, "Well you know what I mean." There will probably be some that don't know what you mean.

Now where is the leader's role in ecclesia studies? One effective thing a leader can do, depending on the lesson, is to make outlines and suggest references. Such materials are generally useful long after the hour study. We keep a file of all study outlines that have been prepared just for future reference.

During the study the leader's role must be an **objective** one. Each point may be gone through and the entire subject be well ventilated and investigated, so that it will be clearly discerned by all. The leader may help direct the comments toward the essence of the study, draw out reluctant brethren and ensure questions are fairly aired, but should not share in the discussion, but should be able at the close to draw together the various findings, then briefly summarizing the subject from his own standpoint before closing or going on to the next discussion.

To stimulate and draw brethren out, the leader can make special assignments for a subsequent meeting. He can pre-announce questions to be discussed next week, or ask a brother or sister to present a summary of the last lesson, or give out additional reading assignments. Let us remember that our studies are not come-as-you-are gatherings, but come-the-best-you-can-be. If the brethren know exactly the ground to be covered and the input needed from them, they can be better prepared to contribute that part.

Now there is another matter concerning good leadership, that is in respect to the **profile** he projects. Is he overbearing? It has everything to do with the ability of the brethren to learn. We think the Pastor has some good suggestions in the Question Book starting at the bottom of page 474: "Now, secondly, my thought is that the next most important meeting would be something in the nature of a Berean study. Why? Because there we

have questions brought out that if there is a good leader will be very interesting to the class. Now that is all a leader is for. The class might get along without a leader unless he has some aptitude in the matter of bringing out things, and a leader that does all the talking is not the successful leader, but it is the leader that get the others to talking; and there is danger of his feeling he is not talking enough, and that he must do more talking. Well, that is a little ambition; a little pride perhaps is there; now he should sink all individuality and all pride and ambition, in his desire to do good to the flock; and whoever succeeds in getting all of the Church enthused and interested in the questions and getting them all brought out, so they will get a thorough understanding of the questions and of the answers, and after he has had the expressions on the question from the class, then sums up the answers, or have them read from the book, or whatever way is found to be the better one—that is the successful leader; and that will be a successful class, because they will come to understand the subjects and to appreciate them. But it is another matter altogether if you do not have a proper leader. If he wants to talk all the time, or does not know how to draw out the class, he is not a proper leader for such a meeting. That is the part to be studied. If any of us have been unsuccessful in the past, let us study how to interest people, to put the question this way, and that way, and to get them interested, and not to brow-beat them. I know there are some who take the other way and say, ‘Well you do not understand your lesson at all, you have not studied this lesson.’ They are not there as children to be brow-beaten; they are there as brothers and sisters of the Lord; they come there and want to be helped; maybe some of them have not had a sufficiency of time to study. Let them feel that by the next meeting they want to know something about the answers to the questions, so they will be prepared, and not have to say, ‘I don’t know.’ You see there is a different way of getting at the matter. Now it is for the leader of a meeting to study as the Apostle says, ‘Study to show thyself approved’—as a leader. Paul was not writing to all the class, he was writing to a leader, Timothy. ‘Study to show thyself approved, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed’—bring the matter out properly, rightly divided, and not only rightly divide the word, but also in respect to the lesson, bringing everything out. All of that goes in, you see, as part of the leaders’ proper course. And it is for him to study this and see how best he can get at it, how he can enter sympathetically with all the class into the whole question, and not stand aloof from them and treat them as if they were lower but as brethren. You will find that those who go right in as one of the brethren have the most influence with the flock. That is what you are. Are we not sheep? Certainly. We are not merely shepherds doing a shepherding work, but we also belong to the sheep. The fact that the Lord has given us the privilege of speaking for him, as his representatives in the flock, does not alter the fact that we are still sheep. We are not lords over the flock nor over the heritage. We are still sheep and want to still continue to have the sheep-like nature, and to manifest it.”

The Pastor goes on, Page 476, par. two: “And I think there is an important point that some of the dear brethren overlook. They feel too much the importance of the eldership,

in the sense of ruling. That is natural, you know; they cannot help it; but keep it down; it is the old man who is trying to get up; keep him down; we are all on a level as New Creatures; and we would say, 'As New Creatures I want all the Lord's flock here, all of his class, to have their say, just as much say as I have; we all have a right.' And you will find, again, that even if the class would not rebel against what you do, yet they will appreciate it if you watch out for their liberties and their rights, and if you consult them they will appreciate it."

After saying we should all mind the same things, Brother Russell says in Volume VI, page 327: "But it is not intimated that it will all be attained in one meeting. The Lord's people not only have differently developed heads, and differences in experience or education, but they are additionally of different ages as New Creatures—babes, youths, matured. It must not surprise us, therefore, if some are slower than others to comprehend and, hence, slower to be fully persuaded in their own minds respecting some of 'the deep things of God.' ... we have all need of patience with each other, and forbearance with each other's peculiarities—and behind these must be love increasing every grace of the Spirit as we attain more and more nearly to its fullness.

"This being so, all questions, all answers, all remarks—in meetings where several participate—should be *for* the entire company present (and not personal to anyone or any number), and should, therefore, be *addressed to the chairman*, who represents all... Hence, too, after having expressed his own view, each is quietly to hear the views of others and not feel called to debate or restate his already stated position. Having used his opportunity, each is to trust to the Lord to guide and teach and show the truth, and should not insist that all must be *made to see* every item as he sees it, nor even as the majority view it...

"We agree however, that every item of truth is important, and that the smallest item of error is injurious, and that the Lord's people should pray and strive for unity in knowledge; but we must not hope to attain this by force. Unity of spirit on the first basic principles of truth is the important thing; and where this is maintained we may be confident that our Lord will *guide* all possessing it into all truth due and necessary to him..." Phil. 3:15, "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded; and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you."

Brethren, we need not be conclusive and absolute on every point brought out in a study. On some things we should withhold our judgment until we have time for extended and personal review. A leader should never cut anyone off from a **sincere question** or expression. If a point is being made out of maliciousness or has a subtle deception, that would be dangerous, and would require direction by the leader. But don't quash or intimidate a brother for a poor expression. We need to gently lead one another from darkness and misunderstanding to light. The Heavenly Father does not teach us through fear and guilt, but by **discovery**. So we should be careful not to heap intimidation on one another's heads.

The leader should seek to be definitive in his own comments, and ask for clarification of other comments if they seem unclear. He can explore the reasoning process of the brethren that lead to conclusions. There is little value in presenting ideas unless we can understand why they are true or false. Consider a Tabernacle study. One brother may say, "I think the court posts represent the spirit begotten." Another says, "I think they represent the tentatively justified." And another may say, "I think they represent the great company." Of what value is it until you hear the reasons and what a viewpoint necessitates or does not necessitate in accompanying consideration. Many of our fears are alleviated when we understand the background and scope from which a brother, or sister states a conclusion. These things a leader can draw out with skillful questions. Or his questions may reveal **inconsistencies** in a statement in such a way as each will discover the truth principles for himself without feeling **accused**.

The leader's questions should be such as lead not to re-quoting the paragraph just read, but for explanations as to **why we accept such conclusions**, or for **supporting evidence** from scripture, history, examples, etc. I have no special objection to the use of the prepared volume questions, except I don't think they always reach the essence of thought or principle in the paragraphs. But I also think studies are best received when they carry the character and insights of the leader. Two leaders may not cover the same material in just the same way. And it is good that we have fresh dimensions to the study leadership. In fact we recommend some form of leader rotation for this very reason.

In this matter of leader questions, I think it is occasionally appropriate to ask a question like, "How would you answer this objection?" or "What is your reply to such and such a position?" then to state a position we may know is a current view, in order to have the truth principles more clearly defined. But I do not wish to be misunderstood in this respect. We are all to be wary of defending error. Promoting **debate** for debate's sake, or playing **devil's advocate** can be **confusing** to the promoter, the defender and the observer. And that is the furthest of our desires for a class study.

Differences of view will sometimes arise and they should not be suppressed. But we should strive to leave emotion and personality out of those differences to focus on the logical premises. Sociologists observe that most communication is about 90% emotionally based and 10% logic. How is it with you? Therefore the leader has to work toward having brethren expand and define their expressions. We as hearers must try to determine what is really meant by what is said, not what we think is meant, or what we want to hear. The leader must withhold his own viewpoint till after fairly summarizing the other comments. He must make an objective summary, acknowledging all views expressed, stating their **harmony or contrasts**, then give his own understanding of the matter.

Having covered certain points of difference, no one should feel compelled to run them into the ground week after week. Nor do we think it is healthy to dwell on every word and comma placement in a class volume study. There is much to be gained by encompassing the scope of a lesson before the points made at the beginning are forgotten. We have to be able to appreciate how the premise of a previous chapter enables us to understand the present one. We should see the progress and harmony of reasoning from paragraph to paragraph.

Brethren, are we learning the **principles** of scripture and prophetic interpretation? These things may be compromised in a Volume study that lasts 12 years or more. We are not advocating neglect of detail in an ecclesia study. Some is essential, such as the definition of words, from the scriptures or the Pastor. But some of it may be left to previous personal study and the essence of these brought to the meetings, which may stimulate others to subsequent personal study or discussion.

We are only expressing our own preference and not laying down hard and fast rules. Each class has to adapt to the needs in its own midst. Brethren attending a study may come from divergent backgrounds, have different perception capacities. It takes keen awareness of the needs of a class for a leader to lead a meeting so as to be a stimulus to the more advanced and also not to lose the less **acute student**. We think it best that a study not be gaged to the slowest. They may work hard, mentally just to keep up. But it is good to have something all can **reach for**.

Ecclesia meetings should not be a constant review of first principles of truth just because someone new is attending, though they should not be neglected. Meat for maturing spiritual growth should also be provided. This seems to be the counsel of Heb. 5:12 to 6:2: "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness; for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment."

In conclusion, these are some of the areas of meaningful ecclesia study: Preparation; Definitiveness; Variety of Subjects and Leadership; Patience; Tolerance; Honesty; Depth and Scope; Perseverance.

Finally brethren, remember, study is the theory part of our education. To truly learn, we must **apply the theory IN THE LABORATORY OF DAILY LIFE**.