

LETTERS TO SALVATIONISTS

CHAPTER 18: Conversation

My DEAR COMRADES,

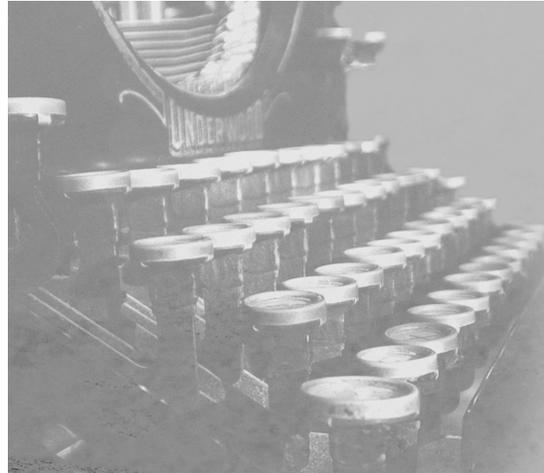
In considering Religion for Every Day, I cannot pass by the subject of Conversation, seeing that it has, so much to do with the intelligence, comfort, and usefulness of Salvationists.

By Conversation, everyone will know that I mean that interchange of thought and feeling between individuals which is effected by means of Speech.

Conversation, in one form or another, is, we can readily imagine, a privilege common to all living creatures. We know that the great Father in Heaven holds some sort of high intercourse with the holy beings by whom He is surrounded; and we have reason to believe that He does this through the medium of some celestial, language. The Archangels and Angels, the Seraphim and, Cherubim, and other of the inhabitants of Heaven, we are expressly informed, bow before His face and cry, Holy, holy, holy, is, the Lord God Almighty." The Bible contains the record of many Conversations that have taken place between God and His people, on the earth, in the past. Indeed, the Sacred Book is full of messages from Jehovah to men, commencing with, "Thus saith the Lord," and of prayers and thanksgivings addressed back to God. All such communication is of the nature of Conversation – God speaking to man, and man speaking to God.

Then we can be quite sure that the Angels talk with each other. The sins and sorrows of our poor world, together with the unremitting and self-sacrificing efforts God is continually making for its Salvation, must be a theme of unceasing interest and a topic of untiring Conversation to all the inhabitants of the Celestial World.

And who can doubt that in Hell the Devils talk over their infernal schemes for the destruction of souls, and recount to each other the progress they make in giving them effect? Ah, my God! there is no lack of interesting matter both for reflection and Conversation there!



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The various species of the brute creation also have, beyond question, some means of conveying the feelings they entertain towards each other, that answers to what we call Conversation. Many animals have the ability to think, if not reason. The habits of the ant, the bee, the dog, the horse, the eagle, and of many other creatures, furnish ample evidence of this. Animals are often capable of affection; they love their kindred and comrades, and sometimes show a remarkable devotion to man. Some animals seem even to possess an instinct which answers to conscience – that is, the ability to discern the difference between a right and wrong course of action. If, then, animals have gifts of thought, of affection, and conscience, is it unreasonable to assume that they also possess some means of communicating their ideas and feelings to each other, however inferior the method of doing so may be to that with which man is endowed?

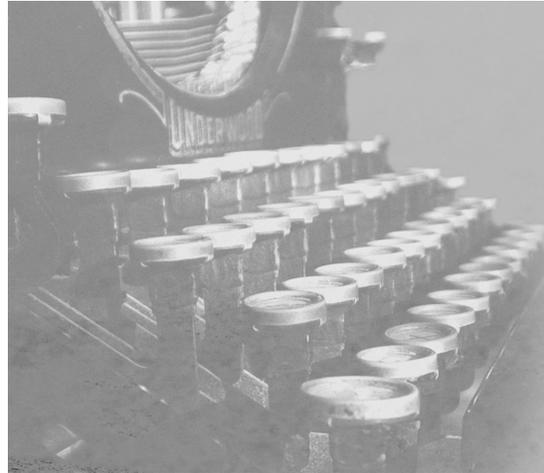
The ability for Conversation is developed in man very early. The babe commences by communicating with its mother, with its eyes, and by the touches of its little fingers. It speaks to her by smiles of gratitude, or by wails of distress. Then, one by one, the words of speech are learned, until there follows the larger vocabulary of language by which almost every thought, desire, or feeling possible to man can be expressed.

Whether, then, Conversation is, or is not, possible to other beings, there can be no question that it is the common privilege of mankind. Of course, while the language of the tongue is the ordinary medium for this intercourse, still, when that organ fails, some other method of communication will be found to take its place. For instance, with what remarkable rapidity and correctness can the deaf and dumb communicate with each other through the movements of their fingers!

In the public meetings I hold in Stockholm, in our large Temple there, I invariably find in the gallery, quite a number of this bereaved class, to whom one or two Officers possessed of the gift of hearing, are repeating, by signs, the thoughts to which I may be giving utterance.

The gift of Conversation is, I am afraid, commonly much abused. It is abused by all kinds of people.

It is probable, that the tongue of the godless has been a greater curse to mankind



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than the sword. So evil, and so productive of evil, among our members is it, that the Apostle affirms that "it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature, and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: but the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."

Then, apart from the more dreadful consequences brought about by godless Conversation, alluded to by the Apostle, what a dreadful amount of time and ability do we see wasted in the useless clatter of ordinary talk! You have only to listen, for an hour, to the Conversation in a railway compartment, at the table of a restaurant, or in the saloon of a steamer, or in the gatherings of ordinary society, to be utterly disgusted with the weakness – nay, the absolute inanity and silliness of the talk. Men and women who have, apparently, had a decent education, and who seem to be intelligent and thoughtful in matters of business, or the management of their own homes, will sit, for hours pouring forth an uninterrupted patter of words containing scarcely a grain of thought or sense, to say nothing about utility.

I am afraid that Salvationists are not faultless in this respect, There are Officers and Soldiers who self-sacrificingly labour in the Open-air, on the platform, In Visitation, and by every other conceivable means; to bless and save the souls of men, who will every day allow the chances of benefiting the people around them by their Conversation, to pass unimproved away. And worse, the same Officers and Soldiers will, at times, absolutely turn these opportunities to means of lowering the religious tone of those present, especially the young. They will grieve the Holy Spirit by lightness and frivolity, by speaking evil of the absent, and generally discouraging those who may have been praying and believing for better things.

These evils often proceed:

1. From want of thought. There may be no evil intention on the part of those concerned, but the evil is done, nevertheless. The example of one Comrade affects another, and the whole company are carried away.

2. The wish to be agreeable is another cause. This in itself is not wrong. But after a few

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pleasant things have been said bearing upon health, passing events, and other matters, an effort should always be made to turn the Conversation in the direction of what is advantageous to those present.

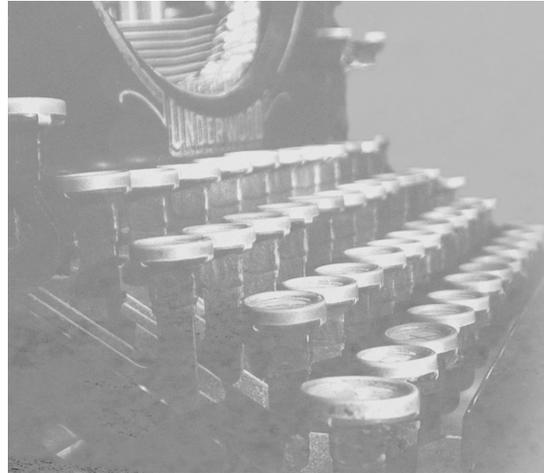
3. The foolish ambition to be thought witty accounts for much of this evil. I must confess to being unable to see any particular advantage flowing out of this clownish notoriety. But there are some Salvationists, I am sorry to say, that will treasure every piece of trivial nonsense they read, or hear, or imagine, in order to pour it out at the first gathering of their Comrades – often, I am ashamed to say, regardless of the presence of the inexperienced, or even of the ungodly.

4. Some of those to whom I am referring, will be guilty of this trashy talk, in order to appear more than ordinarily clever. They cannot let a topic pass without saying something about it, whether or not they have anything to say that is likely to be intelligent, instructive, or useful – in fact, whether they know anything upon the subject or not. Such people should remember the remark of the ancient sage who, when asked why he did not take part in some particular Conversation, replied, "What was to the point I could not say, and what was not to the point I would not say."

What advantages, then, may be gained by Conversation?

1. The profit and pleasure proceeding from useful Conversation can scarcely be overstated. To begin with, it provides valuable employment for time which would otherwise be wasted. Only count up the number of hours spent in a single year, in company with kindred, friends, or strangers, which afford us the chance of profitable talk, and you will be surprised at the total. Take them at only two hours per day and you have over seven hundred and thirty per year, which, divided by ten (about the number of working hours of an average Salvationist), gives you over seventy days, or ten weeks, in the year. Instead of wasting all this precious time in useless gossip, think how large a portion of it could be agreeably employed in doing good to the peoples around you by profitable talk.

2. It must be borne in mind, that in Conversation we have opportunities for usefulness that we cannot find elsewhere. It seems to me that multitudes of people take more



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notice, and have a clearer understanding of things that are said to them over the table, than they do of what is addressed to them from the platform, although accompanied by all sorts of denunciations and promises; one reason for this probably being, that the things spoken of in a quiet personal talk will often be discussed in a more natural and understandable manner. Moreover, the person to whom you are speaking, at such times, has the opportunity, which is not possessed by the individual in a public audience, for seeking information on aspects of a question that he does not exactly understand. Then again, in Conversation the people speak back to you, thus compelling them to think of what is being said. So, altogether, there is a remarkable facility in our lives for spreading information by this method, which does not exist in any other.

Further, there will frequently be children sitting about, who will usually listen to a Conversation, and very often gather from it instruction that they would not be likely to gain so effectively by any other means.

Moreover, Salvationists are constantly meeting with people whose minds are full of all sorts of strange, crooked, and false notions about God, The Army, and religion generally. I seldom read an article referring to our Work, in the Press, but I find it full of blunders and misrepresentations; and I rarely get into Conversation with a stranger, but I find him equally ignorant and misinformed concerning the principles upon which we carry it on, and the results that flow from it.

Now, what is to be done with these people?

They will not come to our meetings, and see and hear for themselves, neither will they read our publications. It appears to me, therefore, that our greatest, almost our only, chance with them lies in the direction of Conversation. I, therefore, advise my Comrades to talk to this class of individuals, and hear their difficulties about the Movement, about conversion, about faith, and about God, whenever they have the opportunity.

Tell them your own experience, and God will help you to pour light into their minds which may be of the utmost value, making them fast friends of The Army, or better



still, leading them to Salvation.

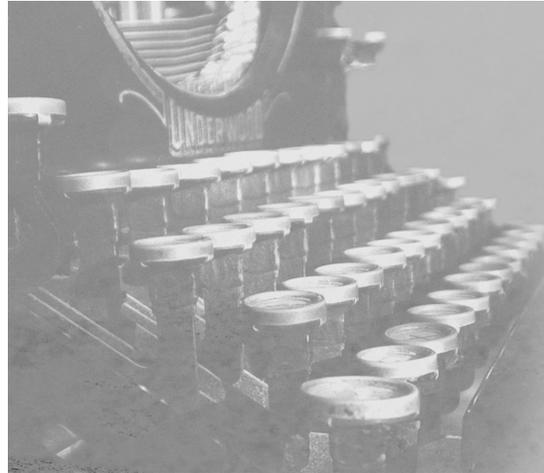
3. Conversation with Comrades and friends of similar aim and spirit will ever be found to combine pleasure with usefulness. What privilege or duty is there on earth, apart from communion with God, that is more enjoyable than intelligent and sympathetic Conversation between kindred spirits? Even the meaningless gossip about the most trivial things has a momentary charm. How much more satisfying is a Conversation, by which you are conscious that you have talked about matters of higher worth and interest, in which you have imparted useful instruction, inspired holy feelings, or been edified and inspired in return! Such intercourse between the saints of earth is in harmony with the chiefest joys of Heaven.

Looking back over my own life, how well I remember many of the delightful experiences of this character, which it has been my privilege to realize! Precious have those hours of communion been! How thoughts and language flowed on such occasions! how our hearts burned! what resolves for heroic, Christ-like deeds were formed! How swiftly the hours passed; and when the time for parting came, how reluctant was the conclusion of the glorious feast! Such seasons and opportunities are not withheld from me, even among the crowded calls and claims of to-day, and such seasons and opportunities will be my portion, I trust, till I change the precious communion of the good and noble here for blissful fellowship with the redeemed before the Throne.

To make the most of the privilege of Conversation must, then, be an important duty, which every Salvationist ought, with all his heart, to endeavour to discharge. If every Officer and every Soldier will labour to make their Conversation profitable, what interesting and useful talks there will be when Comrades meet together; when they sit at the tables where they take their daily food; in their journeyings to and fro; at the family gatherings, whether of joy or sorrow – nay, in every place to which the Providence of God may send them!

Let us enquire how this duty can be rightly discharged.

1. Watchfulness will be necessary. There should be a set purpose to guard and guide



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the exercises of the tongue. Holy Christians, of ancient times, said much about the grace of "Recollectedness. By this, they meant that state of mind, in which the soul is kept awake to the opportunity of the hour, and the best method of using it for the glory of God. Oh, how often, after the event, do we say to ourselves, "Why did I allow the Conversation to go off in that useless direction? Why did I not make an effort to turn it to better account?" Or "Why did I not offer that remark, which, I now can see, might have been so useful to A, B, or C?" Or "Why did I not propose a song, or offer to pray, or do something that I can now see might have proved a real blessing to those who were there?" !

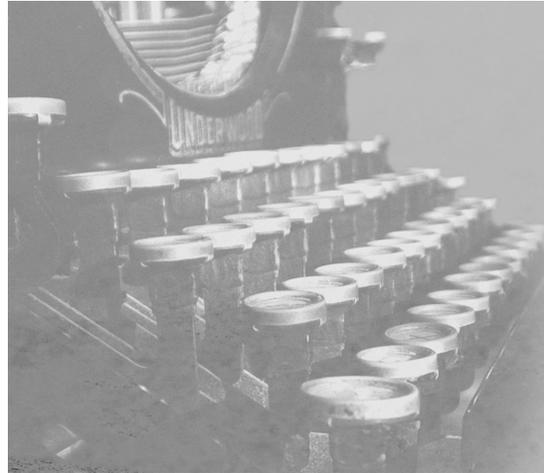
But, alas! this "presence at mind" which is often spoken of as the grace of Recollectedness – as to who we are and what is most likely to be useful at the moment – is too frequently absent when most needed, and we lose the chance for ever.

Now, if we are to make our Conversations promote the honour of Christ, and the well-being of those around us, we must watch for opportunities, and steadily use them to that end. Why not? A Salvationist goes to the Open-air meeting and on to the platform, with such an object. He says to himself, "I am not going to let this meeting drift into a mere pastime, a thing just for the amusement of the hour. No, I will make it benefit someone for this world and the next." Why should there not be some such resolution, some similar purpose with respect to the innumerable opportunities of usefulness presented by Conversation?

I do not want it to be supposed that I am advocating anything like bondage, or sanctimonious or melancholy talk. Oh, dear, no! Anything of that kind would at once defeat the object for which I am contending.

The same rule applies to the casual meeting with Comrades, or indeed, with anyone, where there is time for a little talk.

The first condition of profitable Conversation, especially in the family, or in more intimate circles, is a sense of freedom. This necessitates a certain amount of what might be termed "small talk," which, more or less, embraces the matters that have to do with the family life of the hour. This will include a free-and-easy chat about the



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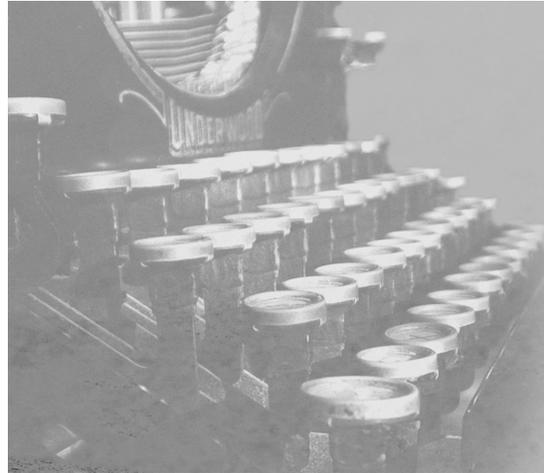
health of the invalid, the last letters from relatives and friends far away, the sayings and doings of the Children, their lessons, their toys and their play.

Or again, there are the happenings at the meeting of the Sunday, or the night before, the coming holidays, the weather, and a hundred other things which are of natural interest at the moment, and cannot be ignored. Indeed, if for no other reason, or advantage, they will serve the good purpose of training the junior members of the circle in the art of friendly and kindly Conversation, and do something towards correcting the loud, boorish style of talk which is now so common with many young people. When, however, all, or a portion, of these matters have been turned over, more important subjects can be mentioned, and dealt with as circumstances may dictate.

2. Again, in Conversation there should be nothing vulgar or impure. I leave the family out of consideration here – for, surely, such a thing would be impossible there – my reference being specially to Conversation where men only are present, although I am not sure that women do not occasionally err in this direction.

We ought not to forget the readiness of the human heart to take fire! A very small spark may kindle, in the most innocent breast, a flame of lust that will never be extinguished – no, not in the fires of Hell. I could not allow myself to even imagine that a Salvationist would lend himself to the expressions and anecdotes that pass current so freely amongst many ungodly people. Nevertheless, Comrades may be betrayed into expressions that have double meanings, and that are not in keeping with the purity enjoined by our Lord, and in which The Salvation Army glories. Therefore, let them beware; and set a vigilant watch at "Ear-gate" as well a guard upon their lips!

3. Nothing should be allowed in Conversation that is contrary, to sound doctrine. If you have difficulties about the holy truths to which you stand pledged, seek for counsel from your Leaders, or leave them over until you come to know the will of God more perfectly, always bearing in mind how easy it is to sow doubt, or plant unbelief, in young or ignorant minds, which will go on growing, until rooted and grounded in their very nature, they produce poisonous fruits that fill the soul with error and ruin the whole life. You may be able to grapple with these infidel difficulties yourself, but the



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minds in which you sow the seed may not be strong enough to accomplish this mastery, and may, consequently, go down under them for ever. To show off your knowledge of falsehood and other evils may be an amusement to you, but it may result in death-eternal to those who hear you talk. Again, I say, Beware!

4. Let there be no disloyalty in your Conversation.

I sometimes think that every man has a Judas somewhere in his make up, and oftenest of all that traitor is in his mouth! The shortcomings, misdoings, and imperfections of those whom the Providence of God has placed over men, has ever been a tempting topic for discussion. Fickle and weakly and evil minds are only too frequently led away by it, and a host of miseries and misfortunes follow. In the history of all organisations, there have been men, and, alas! some women also, who, whether they have remained within its borders or gone over to its foes, have delighted in destroying the confidence of their Comrades in the beneficence and rectitude of those placed in authority over them. I know that they will sometimes tell you, that this destroying of the landmarks and undermining of faith, has been done without any evil intention. But, alas! the evil consequences have followed, whether intended or no. Do not be one of those sneaking whisperers! Better pull your tongue out by the roots, than let it cause one of God's little ones to stumble and be lost. Do not allow yourselves to make insinuations in the dark, which you would be ashamed to have repeated in the broad daylight. Scorn to make suggestions behind the backs of your Comrades calculated to destroy their influence and to cripple their Power for usefulness, which you would be afraid to speak out before their faces. Remember the words of Jesus: "Whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear" – that is, whispered – shall be proclaimed upon the housetops!"

I need not say, that this refers to all kinds of lawful authority, whether it be that of the master in the workshop, the mistress in the family, an Officer of The Army, or such an Officer's wife; indeed, from the Soldier to the citizen, right up to the top, both in The Army and in the State. Neither practise it, nor allow it, I say, in any company where you have a voice or in which you may be present. Nay, more, rebuke it in anyone else, no matter who it may be.



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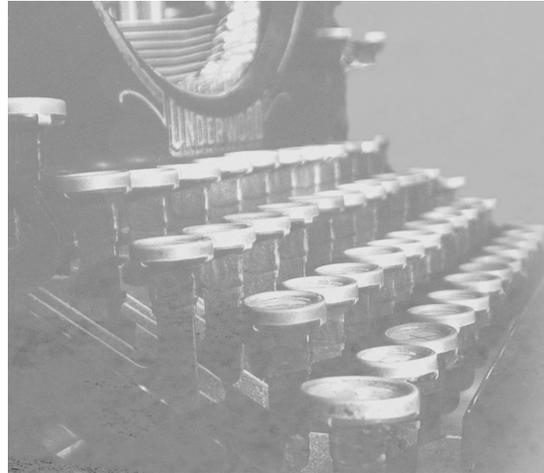
5. In your Conversation keep as far off the dictatorial as you can. Do not speak in tones or with manners that would seem to imply that you know better than everyone else; that you are infallible, and that "wisdom will die with you!" It is quite possible that you may have some reason for entertaining the idea that you are in every way superior in sense, intelligence, and religion to those around you, and that your notions are always and ever correct ones. But even if it is so, it is certainly unnecessary that you should inform every person with whom you are familiar of the fact. Remember that, after all, it is just possible that you may be mistaken. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit, among other things, the kindly esteem of those with whom they associate; while the self-opinionated and self-righteous and masterful earn only their pity and hearty dislike, if not their absolute scorn.

What can be done, then, to accomplish all this – that is, to make Conversation as pleasant and useful as possible? I will give you some advice.

1. Make a definite effort by starting topics in Conversation that you can see will be interesting and useful to the company in which you find yourself; and, having started them, try to keep them going. The latter part of the business is the difficulty. For myself, I have seldom failed, in any company, in the task of introducing a subject, but keeping it afloat has often been, not only difficult, but all but impossible. The excitement arising from the occasional meeting with friends, seems to generate a kind of wordy mood that, unless taken hold of with a strong hand, carries everybody away, so that before one knows where he is, the topic he has brought on to the board has vanished, and three or four others are being discussed in its place.

It is not a bad plan to have a little understanding – a kind of conspiracy – amongst one or two members of the company to keep a given topic to the front. This can easily be done, and what one says the other can second, or reply to, or raise a difficulty about, until all are interested, and then the ball will roll on of its own momentum.

2. Intelligent and interested listening has much to do with good talking. Who can speak, when the hearers make it evident that they are too impatient to listen, or that they want all the time to themselves? I have found the greatest difference in the ease with which I have conversed with some who pass for being the great people of the



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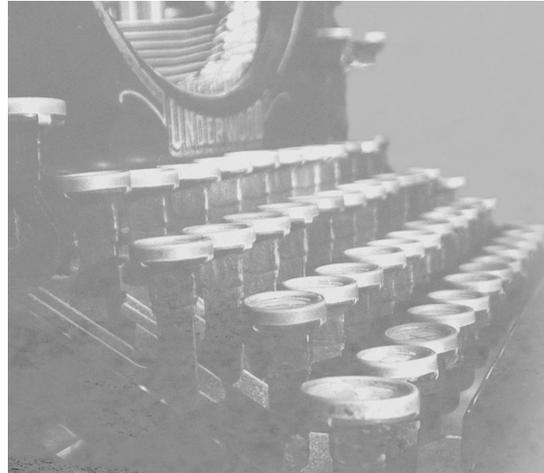
world. The manner of many seems to stop the flow of thought, and paralyse the power of utterance; while that of others has just the contrary effect, making it not only a delight to listen to what they say, but a pleasure to answer them, or to start off on a line of your own.

The late Mr. Gladstone was one of the most remarkable instances of this. He was a great man, full of stores of wisdom and experience of many kinds, having, perhaps, a greater knowledge of the world, of men and things, than anyone else in it, during the later years of his life. And yet, when we talked together, one afternoon, in his study at Harwerden, his manner made me feel so perfectly at home, he said all he had to say so gently, so enquiringly, that I found it a delight to talk to him, and a greater delight still to listen. What a contrast his manner afforded to some people's way of dealing with Salvation; yes, and what a contrast it afforded to the manner with which some Salvationists deal with each other!

Similar feelings will be experienced in Conversation with ordinary people. I frequently meet with those who make it evident that they care for nothing that I can say, however important it may be. In such cases, I usually close up, instinctively, and retire within myself, like the snail into his shell, concluding that either I have nothing to say that is thought worth listening to by my hearers, or that my manner of saying it lacks the power to interest. Others, however, even when they do not agree with all I say, will incline their ears and answer me by approving smiles, by questions of their own, by responses, and confirmatory expressions, so far as to make it difficult for me to stop speaking, or to tear myself away from their society. You will find it very much the same.

3. Encourage others around you to talk. Often those who have something, to say, which is most worthy of being said, will be the last to join in the Conversation while those who are the least intelligent, will be the most pushful and make the most rattle. Ask for opinions from the silent ones. In fact, it will not be found to be a bad plan, occasionally, to get everyone to give their own view of the subject under discussion.

Do not overlook the women who may be present. How coolly, unjustly, and thoughtlessly – I was going to say, how conceitedly – the men will often ignore the women in a Conversation, concerning a matter about which they have just as correct and, perhaps, even a more practical judgment than themselves! They may not exactly



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prohibit the women joining in the Conversation; on the contrary, they may say that they have the same opportunity of expressing their opinions as themselves; but the arbitrary manner in which they will absorb the time, and address their Conversation to each other, scarcely noticing the women, makes it plain enough that they do not consider that they can have anything to say to which it is worth their while to listen.

In the family I need not point out that the wife, especially if she be a mother also, ought always to have the opportunity, whether she uses it or not, of a fair share in whatever Conversation goes on; and on many questions it will not only be safe, but useful and also very interesting, to bring the children in. It will make them listen to what their elders say; and having to deliver themselves of their opinion before father and mother; will assist them in forming habits of thought and expression which will be useful to them in the future.