

Articles and Sermons :: Is it a sin to have a religious debate with other people?

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Question: Is it a sin to have a religious debate with other people?

Answer: Greetings friend. I will be happy to discuss this issue with you today and your issue is well-taken: there is indeed a lot of religious debate and the non-religious people of the world are quick to point the finger at religious strife as the cause of many of the world's problems, like wars. But I see debate as a positive thing and I'll share five reasons why.

First and foremost, if there is such thing as truth (and Christianity certainly affirms this) then defending it should be our highest goal, and its opposite, skewing the truth, would be an overt sin. But how about ignoring the truth? Does God want that? I doubt it since he wants us to contend for the truth. Now, embracing an anti-debating philosophy does not mean that you hate the truth, but it does mean that you are opposed to its defense. That would be socially irresponsible (which could itself be a sin), but it is definitely anti-biblical.

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. (Jude 3, NIV)

Second, debate is an important tool for advancing knowledge; it is not a fist-fight with words. You see, a truly new idea is rare. So we advance in knowledge by building on existing ideas. But the very nature of this process requires that we challenge every idea that we purport to improve, and to the layman, this might sound like a fight but it's not; it is the legitimate process of human growth.

Think of the advancements in technology just in your lifetime. There were only a few truly new ideas. Most of the advancement was incremental and the building-upon of established tech. The world of ideas is just like that. A person will articulate an idea which becomes a de facto basis for discussion, then it is both attacked and defended which is healthy. Good ideas should be tested, and indefensible ideas should not be allowed stand. And although a snapshot of the ebb and flow of the debating process might make it seem as if the good guys are losing, the fight continues, and the advantage moves back and forth.

For instance, Christian apologist William Paley (1743-1805) developed the famous clockmaker analogy to support the idea of God as Designer (teleology) and what a great idea that was! Now, Paley won the moment but he did not win the day. Philosophers engaged this idea and it enjoyed both defeat and vindication. But here we are over 200 years later, and persons like renowned anti-theist Richard Dawkins have dedicated their lives to defeating Paley's argument and they must because everything does indeed look designed!

So, a materialist atheist will say that although Paley was correct in noting that everything looks designed, he was incorrect in postulating God as the cause because the physical brain (purportedly) causes us to see things as designed whether or not they really are. Then a Christian apologist will respond to a Dawkins (sometimes, but not always, in a formal debate) and we will go back and forth like that. So note this well: the challenging and defending of positions is not a sinful process; this is how we temper the steel of an idea.

As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. (Proverbs 27:17, NIV)

Note also that the history of ideas persists as a rich source for our learning. There were many ideas throughout time that still stand as cardinal points in the learning process even if they no longer still stand as plausible truth. (We still discuss Plato after 2400 years!) This is evidence that debate is an important and a legitimate process in building knowledge, and Christians should get used to the idea that even when the process seems to yield a victory for evil, this does not mean that the process itself is vain or flawed.

“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” (Isaiah 1:18, AV)

Third, let’s be clear that neither debate nor the process of debating is in itself sinful. Ontologically speaking, these are containers and processes, not people; as such they can neither perform nor cause sin. Now, they can become the vehicle for sin under the right circumstances but this does not turn them into the agents of sin.

Think of debate as if it were a hammer. There is nothing evil about a hammer; it’s just a tool; it either sits there or it drives nails. But even if you decided to bludgeon someone with it, the hammer itself does not turn evil; it becomes the vehicle for evil for your personal sinful act. In like manner debate is neither good nor sinful; only entities with a free moral will can sin; the tools that we use and the activities in which we participate are merely objects and/or structures for our use. They may contain or help the moral agents who perform sin, but they cannot themselves sin.

As to debate, a person who is driven by pride and manifests this in a debate is sinning. But a person who is driven to serve the Lord and has the purest intentions in the debate is not sinning at all even if these two were debating on the same side of the same topic!

Fourth, the Bible affirms the value of debate but of the right kind of debate.

“But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.” (Titus 3:9, NIV) (c.f. Genesis 3:1-24; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Romans 14:1)

We must always remember concerning debate, that in this too, the battle is the Lord’s.

“Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation. Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked.” (Psalm 43:1, NIV) (c.f. Psalm 38:14-16; Proverbs 21:30)

Jesus sent the disciples out to engage in this very thing but knowing well that the process involves strife and rejection contentions.

“And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” (Mark 6:11, NIV)

The Scripture itself is purposed for debate.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,” (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV, emphasis mine)

Paul himself was purposed for debate.

“It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.” (Philippians 1:15-16, NIV, emphasis mine)

(c.f. Acts 18:28; 2 Timothy 4:2; 1 John 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; Acts 19:8-10)

Fifth, the Bible gives us some positive models of debate, namely Peter, Paul and Jesus.

“The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: ‘By what power or what name did you do this?’ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: ‘It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.’ Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, ‘Which is right in

God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard. (Acts 4:1-21, NIV)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you." (Acts 17:22-23, NIV, emphasis mine)

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'" (Mark 12:28-29, NIV, emphasis mine)
(Note: It would be hard to call debating sin if Jesus himself did it.)

In closing, I'd like to mention William Lane Craig of Reasonable Faith Ministries. Dr. Craig is an American philosopher who has earned European doctorates in both Philosophy and Theology so that he may "debate for a living." That is my term, not his but that's what he does in addition to teaching, writing and lecturing. Craig is a humble Christian guy who happens to "reason" for a living. He does important work for the Great Commission (in part) by participating in high-profile debates that advance the cause of Christ among thinking people.

So let me ask, how else would someone make disciples? We need to engage in reasonable discussions of Christianity's many issues—and all the while in a hostile world. How could we avoid debate? We can't but we can avoid trouble. Just follow God's word.

"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." (1 Pet. 3:15 NIV, Emphasis mine).

Written by Evan Plante