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# Pro Rege

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Volume 2 | Number 4

Article 3

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June 1974

## Attack on and Defense of Debate

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### Recommended Citation

Vander Kooi, Daryl (1974) "Attack on and Defense of Debate," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 2: No. 4, 12 - 16.  
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A quarterly faculty publication of  
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

# ATTACK ON AND DEFENSE OF DEBATE

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It is often said that Christians should not debate. Debate causes dissension in the church and discord within society. This reaction may not be representative of all Christians to debate, but it could represent one of several positions which maintain that a Christian should avoid debate if possible. The major arguments against Christians debating are that it demands objectivity; that it fosters disagreement and disunity; and that it encourages young people to question their Christian training. I will attempt to present these positions and then respond to them.

Some contend that theoretically the debater and the judge must remain completely objective at all times, that is, set aside all their beliefs, their faith, so that they can arrive at truth through reason alone. While some debaters simply assume objectivity as a possibility, others maintain that objectivity exists

because man's mind, in its original state, is free of all tendencies, inhibitions, and beliefs: that it is a "tabula rasa." However, because society has instilled many inhibitions, the debater as a rational thinker must suspend his judgments to enable his rational mind once more to attain original conditions.

Such a "setting aside" would be a denial of Christian principles, which are to direct man in all of life's activities. Similarly, the Christian believes that all of man (including his reason) is tainted by sin, and one cannot arrive at truth through reason or logical argumentation. Should a Christian set his Christian beliefs aside in order to be "objective," he would be denying his Lord.

Second, some contend that debate encourages disagreements and emphasizes the differences among Christians, while Christians should be striving for harmony and love. All one has to do is check the record of the Chris-

tian church to see that debates have resulted in a compromise of doctrinal truths, or dissension and schism. Debate, itself, causes this separation they say, by placing all propositions or topics into "either-or" categories--the affirmative and the negative. Imposing this construction on the issues of the Christian church, debating procedure demands that one be accepted and the other rejected, or that one is true or right and the other wrong or false. This arbitrary standard encourages harsh conflicts and disagreements, goes the argument, and the strategies or questionable tactics used in many debates foster even more conflict. The Christian, it is said, is to strive for peace and harmony among men. And, since the Christian is to love his neighbor and work for peace among men, he should not use debate technique, which results in schism. He should use a different method of resolving conflicts--one which emphasizes unity, friendliness, and mutual concern.

The third objection claims that debate encourages young people to question their beliefs, their parents' advice, and their Christian training. Since debate over-emphasizes reason and demands a thorough, logical, objective examination of one's position, it breeds an unhealthy logical testing of Christian standards. Such activity often results in rejection of the true Christian life. The Christian's position, they say, is one of faith, not logic. Logical testing does not fit faith assumptions, and when young people apply such tests and find that Christianity is not "logical," they frequently reject it. They accept the standard of reason propagated by debate and debate courses to be the final approach to truth. Young people should not, therefore, according to this view, be encouraged to test their training and their beliefs by participating in debate.

I have presented the above objections as impartially as possible in order to indicate some of the stronger objections to argumentation and debate. If the basic assumptions of the above arguments are valid, then Christians must, indeed, test the advisability of debate. If these objections are correct, then the Christian may have good reason to claim that debate has had a bad influence on the church.

There is, however, another point of view.

It is my contention that Christians can debate, and that it is the improper use of debate which has resulted in problems of belief. The following discussion is an attempt to refute the previous arguments against debate.

What is objectivity? Many Christians consider objectivity to be an integral part of rationalism. It is considered to be that activity demanded of man in which he sets all concerns, interests, beliefs, and assumptions aside in order to create a "clean slate" in his mind. Once he has eliminated all possible influences, he can then use his reason or logical capacity to arrange, balance, and refute all arguments. After his own critique of opposing positions, he can select the best of the considered options. This is rational man's attempt to find truth. For a Christian to maintain this position, however, would surely be a rejection of Christ's claims upon his whole life.

It is incorrect, however, to equate the "objectivity" of debate with the objectivity of a rationalistic philosophy. The "objectivity" of debate is not a philosophy. Rather, objectivity, and its partner, suspension of judgment, are the tools which the debater uses in his analysis and which the judge uses in his decision-making.

The "objectivity" of debate is the mental activity in which a debater recognizes that there are many influences which could color his decisions and his analysis of a proposition. He is particularly aware of political, emotional, and semantic influences. He wishes to minimize (not eliminate) these influences upon his understanding of the issues. Although he recognizes the impossibility of the rationalist's objectivity, he does wish to avoid undue influences. The debater wishes to view a proposition without excessive emotional reactions and prejudices. The debater's "objectivity" enables him to see degrees of variability and is not to be compared with the objectivity of absolutes found in rationalistic philosophy. The relatively attainable "objectivity" of the debater is closely associated with another tool--suspension of judgment.

Suspension of judgment is the withholding of a decision until all arguments have been presented. Part of actively maintaining an "objectivity" is the suspension of judgment by

which the debater can avoid making a decision for or against a proposition until he has thoroughly studied all sides of that proposition. Similarly, the courtroom judge or jury avoids the final decision-making process until the case has been presented by both the prosecutor and the defender. To make a decision prematurely violates the principle of suspension of judgment, encourages a decision by prejudice, and prevents the positive use of the "objectivity" tool.

It appears to me that the misinterpretation and the lack of suspension of judgment have resulted in the miscarriage of debate in the Christian church and community. If one denies the use of suspension of judgment when analyzing a proposition, he allows each member to make a decision before both positions are presented. Such activity precludes a complete exposition of all arguments and encourages the questionable workings of prejudice, individual interpretation, and merely emotional response. These actions can easily become heated personal encounters which promote division or schism.

Similarly, the confusion of the rationalist's objectivity and the debater's tool of "objectivity" can result in a denial of proper debate procedure in favor of a prejudiced, hasty decision. The argument then becomes a conflict of gross generalization and statements of overwhelming inclusiveness. All issues, then, become polarized--right or wrong, true or false. When discrimination and differentiation fail, decisions become simply emotional. Debate is then no longer a decision-making tool, but an excuse for prejudiced behavior. For example, one faction holds a meeting before the entire church group is to meet. The faction makes a definitive decision, and thereby prevents the possibility of hearing both positions by locking the second faction out of the building. Having been locked out, the second group also finalizes their decision, saying "our position is Biblically correct, just, and true." All interaction ceases, tempers flare, and the communion of the saints is disrupted. Such action can result in civil lawsuit and schism in the church. Both factions could have used the tools of "objectivity" and suspension of judgment, and prevented that undesirable situation. However, it should not be concluded that the

use of debate tools is the only necessary ingredient to prevent a schism.

The Christian recognizes his presuppositions because his major criticism of objectivity is based upon his desire to apply his presuppositions to all of life and not to set them aside for a rationalistic objectivity. It is true that he should not deny his faith assumptions in debate. Actually, the Christian should seek to apply his faith assumptions in debate, rather than condemn debate as anti-Christian.

Then what about the argument that debate emphasizes differences and disagreements? The Christian recognizes that disagreement and differences do exist. But does debate encourage them? The basic objective of debate is to settle or resolve disagreements, not to encourage them. Debaters recognize the different positions and attempt to represent them, as well as they are able, before a judge who then settles the dispute with a final decision. The judge might be a legislative body, a courtroom jury, a church assembly, or a listener in a dormitory room.

This argument against debate also fails to recognize the debate concept of "position." While the debate process places the contenders on two different sides of the argument, it permits a variety of positions on each side. For example, in the debate proposition--"Resolved: That the federal government legalize abortion"--the two sides would be affirmative and negative. Two debaters on the same side may, however, have very different positions. One debater may wish to legalize abortion for all women according to each woman's discretion, while the other might favor the legalization of abortion only for those cases involving health hazard. Each position can have different presuppositions while remaining on the same side. One should not forget this concept of position when discussing sides. To do so could cause polarized misrepresentations.

Although it is easy to "brush off" the argument about young debaters questioning their Christian faith, there should be a thoughtful reply to such an argument, because it is raised frequently enough by concerned Christians. Does debate actually teach young people to question their faith?

The debate student is trained to examine

statements or arguments in order to locate logical fallacies. If, however, the student believes that an attack on the Christian faith is being "only logical," "reasonable," or "objective," then he errs. I do not believe that the practice of (or study of) debate theory demands that the student attack his Christian faith. Notice that there is a difference between thorough, careful examination and ruthless attack. Examining one's Christian faith is not the same as rejecting it or even doubting it. I believe that one's faith can be examined. Once the Christian faith has been examined, it should be even stronger than before. Also, examining or testing one's faith is different from examining a resolution. The debate student should not assume that he can examine his faith for its logic. Christian faith is not a system of logical or illogical postulates arranged in syllogistic order. The examination of one's faith seeks to determine the extent of its growth, its application in life, its love toward a neighbor, etc. This is not an examination for logical fallacy as found in debate. The debater should not assume that he can equate logical examination with "the test of faith." To do so means a rejection of Christian faith for rationalism.

One final question remains. If a Christian can debate, does that mean that he can also debate his faith assumptions? Yes and no. If the question means: "Should a debater contest a basic position of faith, such as, whether God is dead or not?" then I would respond, "No. To debate such an issue is to change debate from a tool to a philosophy. Such a discussion of faith commitment is really a time for witnessing and not for argumentation. The ultimate answer is simply--"I believe." That is not a debatable issue. However, one should not confuse his faith assumptions with a truly debatable question, particularly when it is closely associated with his accepted standards.

If a person questions whether a debater should or should not debate the legalization of abortion, then I would reply, that he may, for his position on surgical procedure is based upon his Christian beliefs but not equal to his Christian beliefs. On this basis, the Christian can debate abortion in order to place it in its true Christian perspective. Some Christians do maintain that abortion should be legalized (the

affirmative side) for extreme cases of hazard to the mother's physical or mental health (a position on the affirmative side). The debate is on the issues of a Christian's stand regarding a policy of abortion and not the fact of his faith assumptions. Similarly, many Christians who have the same faith assumptions will have different points of view on many other questions, such as, federal aid to private and parochial schools, the necessity of capital punishment, or socialized medicine. Again, one cannot debate his faith assumptions, but he can debate questions of policy very much involved with his faith.

There are several reasons for encouraging the Christian to study and to practice argumentation and debate. There is a need for Christians to be involved in the many vocations associated with the local, state, and federal governments. Legislators, advisors, judges, and assistants can readily use their studies of argumentation in their vocations. At the risk of constructing a hasty generalization, I would say that Christians in all vocations should develop their abilities to gather valid evidence for a position, to recognize solid, legitimate arguments, to refute fallacies, and to abide by authoritative decisions.

If a Christian debates, then he should debate from a Christian perspective. This perspective or world and life view should sufficiently inform his debating so that it become a Christian decision-making process. Debate will not be "Christianized" by simply employing Christians as debaters. Rather, it is the application of Christian principles that makes the debate intrinsically different. I believe the following principles to be essential for Christian debate:

1. The Christian debater will seek the opinions of other Christians. Part of the procedure in gaining and gathering information is the discussion of the debate topic with friends and acquaintances in order to gain a more complete perspective. The Christian debater will want to make sure that his perspective is a consistently Christian one. Such discussions should help locate the issues directly involving religious values and beliefs.

2. The Christian debater will conduct thorough research. He will be concerned with

the elimination of faulty reasoning, poor evidence, or hastily developed arguments, which are frequently the results of shoddy research. Such faults become a discredit to the Christian and to Christian debate, for to rely on faulty research evidence is to promote falsehood.

3. The Christian debater will recognize the involvement of his values. During analysis, he will watch for those issues which call for an expression of his beliefs and values and will attempt to construct a consistently Christian point of view.

4. The debater will not side-step issues that are clearly centered around a Christian--non-Christian problem. This is a corollary of the previous principle. To avoid the obvious confrontation on issues is really to deny one's profession of Christ as Lord of his whole life. The Christian debater should construct his case on the principles he believes applicable to all of life.

5. The debater will help his fellow man as part of his love to his "neighbor." In other words, he will place greater priority on arriving at the truth than he will on competitive strategy. He should work with his peers during research and analysis so that they all achieve a complete analysis, a Christian perspective, and a solid case.

6. The debater will remain honest at all times. He will shun falsification of evidence, withholding important information requested by his opponent, deliberate avoidance of incontrovertible evidence against him, and any other tactics. He should be an example of real integrity and a guide to ethical practices in tournaments, in the courtroom, and in legislative assemblies.

7. A Christian debater will avoid questionable statements and insinuations about his opponents. He should not use attacks on the person of his rival or faulty attacks on his opponents' case. A Christian debater, be he a student in the Student Union Building or a state congressman, should recognize that an attack on the person (ad hominem) of an opponent is contrary to a true attitude of Christian love. He should be aware that to use false arguments as attacks in refutation opposes the Biblical principle of truth and honesty.

8. The trophy in competition, public ac-

claim in the press, or prestige in the House of Representatives is not the primary goal of the Christian debater. It appears to me that other goals, such as the expression and pursuit of truth, the maintenance of honesty, the expansion of God's kingdom, and even the development of one's talents demand precedence.

9. The debater will use Christian tolerance. Christian tolerance is not permissiveness or blindness toward sin. It is not saying, "I know it's wrong, but that's okay." It is not the opening of the gates to a multitude of opinions, all of which are considered equal, permissible, and legitimate. Christian tolerance is not a stamp of approval on all philosophies and religions. Rather, Christian tolerance is an attempt to understand another person, a recognition of his beliefs, his opinions, and his problems, and an acceptance of him as a person. It wishes to know him, to understand him, to guide him, to help him.

Tolerance, then, is acceptance (but not necessarily approval) based upon Christian love for a neighbor. The approval of all conditions, beliefs, and actions is permissiveness or apathy, not tolerance. Debaters should use Christian tolerance in all settings: bowling alley arguments, political bantering in an election year, and collegiate debate. Tolerance is founded upon Christian love, which should be the foundation for all thought and activity.

The above discussion has focused on the debater, but many of the same principles apply to the Christian judge as well. A Christian judge will attempt to be completely honest in his decision-making, will abide by the instructions and rules for judging, will demand truth and honesty, and will base his verdict on the total debate only. The judge may be a civil servant in the courtroom, a graduate student in communication, a legislator, or a general voter. No matter what his capacity, he is in the role of judge, and he should abide by the same principles as the debater.

The nine points above are an attempt to develop a Christian approach to debate, an attempt to illustrate the effect that Christian principles have on debate and argumentation. I hope that the reader will see them as suggesting a problem-solving methodology permeated with Christian love.