**BIBLE TALK Radio Broadcast**

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**Is Debating Religious Questions Wrong?**

The question I want to address on the program today is, “Is it wrong to debate religious questions?”

Have you ever tried to discuss religious differences with someone and he responded by saying, “I don’t believe it’s right for us to debate religious issues. Arguing religion is wrong?”

Often times the door is closed to serious religious discussion of what the Bible teaches by the statement, “It is wrong to argue religion.”

Is that true? Is it wrong for Christians to debate their religious convictions?

What I want to show today is that the Bible teaches that not only is it not wrong to debate religion, but that the Lord even requires His people to do it.

First of all, I think it is important that we mention that the reason Christians should debate religious questions is because there is absolute truth and the truth matters. Jesus said, *"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."* (John 8:32) To be free from the bondage of sin, which is the freedom Jesus is talking about in this passage, one must know the truth. Jesus said when praying to the Father, *"Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.”* (John 17:17). No one can be sanctified without knowing God’s word, the truth. If any of us are to be free of sin and be in fellowship with God we must know the truth, God’s word. You see, there is truth and truth matters. What if someone presents some teaching that is not according to God’s word, the truth? It is the Christian’s responsibility to try to convince him of the error of his way. James says in James 5:19-20, *“Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”* Since truth matters I will try to turn a sinner from the error of his way. And also, if I am the one who is in error, then I should want one who knows the truth to try to convince me of my error so I can know the truth and be saved.

And truth is absolute. There is truth and there is error. There is what is right and there is what is wrong. Either I believe and practice the truth or I believe and practice error. John says in 1 John 4:1, *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”* In verse 6 he says, *“We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”* There is truth and there is error, because truth is absolute. And the nature of truth is that it does not contradict itself. For example, the 2+2 cannot equal both 4 and 5. One is true and the other is false. And so if two people differ on what is the truth, then somebody is wrong. They may both be wrong but they both cannot be right since truth does not contradict itself. And so when two people differ on what the truth is, what should they do? They should search for the truth. They should discuss it, reason together, debate the issue, present arguments, all for the purpose of learning truth and whoever is wrong changes. In Acts chapter 18 we read of Apollos who had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and taught accurately the things of the Lord, but it says “he knew only the baptism of John.” He was in error concerning John’s baptism. He didn’t know he was in error, but he was wrong. Aquila and Priscilla heard him, and they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. No doubt they presented arguments proving that Apollos was wrong in his teaching. Why did they do that? -- because truth matters. To Apollos’ credit he changed and began preaching the truth. What if Apollos had said, “You have your belief and I have my belief, I just don’t think we ought to debate this matter.” If he had done that he would have never known the truth.

When the apostle Paul would enter a city it was his custom to enter a Jewish synagogue to teach them. These Jews didn’t know the truth about the Christ. They didn’t believe that the Christ had already come and they certainly didn’t believe that He was to die on a cross, and be raised from the dead. But Paul reasons with them, and tries to persuade them of the truth. Acts 17:1 says that they came to Thessalonica where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Verses 2 and 3 says, *“Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.’”* Notice, Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures. He made arguments from the Scriptures, proving the death, and resurrection of the Christ. Verses 4 and 5 says that some were persuaded and some were not. In Acts 18 and verse 4, when Paul came to Corinth, it says, *“And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks.”* In Acts 19:8, Paul in Ephesus, “*went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God.”* Paul, in his efforts to persuade these Jews of the truth about the Christ presents arguments for that truth. Why? – because truth matters.

Now, what would Paul do when those to whom he preached opposed the truth that he taught and begin to debate with him? Did he say to them, “It is not right to debate religion,” and then refuse to debate them? No. In Acts 9:29 it says, *“And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him.”* Notice, Paul “disputed against the Hellenists.” The New International Version translates, “*He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews*...” The New American Standard Bible translates “*And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews*...” Paul is debating with these Hellenists. He didn’t back down from a debate. In Acts 15:2 we read of Paul and Barnabas disputing with those who taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses in order to be saved. These were false teachers and Paul and Barnabas do not back down from debating with them. These false teachers were persuading others into their error, and there was a need to defend the truth against this false doctrine. Why? – because truth matters. Paul said in Phil. 1:17, *“knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.”* The word “defense” in this verse is defined by W.E. Vine in his Expository Dictionary of Bible Words as “a verbal defense, a speech in defense” Paul was ready to defend the gospel, even in the face of opposition.

Jesus Himself engaged in debate. In Mark 12:18-28 we read of Jesus debating with the Sadducees over the question, “is there a resurrection from the dead?” The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection which was false. They make an argument for their belief in verses 18-23. Beginning in verse 24 Jesus answers their argument and them presents an argument for the resurrection. Jesus is debating with them. Verse 28 says, in the New International version, “*One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating.”*

Jesus was a debater. He defended the action of His disciples in Matthew 12:1-8. He defended His healing on the Sabbath day in Matthew 12:9-14. He refutes the accusation that He cast out demons by Beelzebub in Matthew 12:22-30. Jesus did not back down from a debate when debate was needed. Why? -- because truth matters.

We also have the responsibility not to back down when truth is attacked, but stand up and speak out. 1 Peter 3:15 says, *“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;”* Jude says in Jude verse 3, *“Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”*  “The faith” is the gospel, the word of God, what we believe. Jude says, “contend earnestly for” it. W.E. Vine says that “contend earnestly” “signifies ‘to contend about a thing, as a combatant’” In other words, we are to contend, even in the face of opposition. This will include debating.

Is debating wrong? No. Not only is it not wrong, it is required of us at times. The reason we debate the truth is because truth matters. It is the truth that will make us free.

But you may be thinking, what about Romans 1:29 and 2 Cor. 12:20 where in the KJV “debate” is listed among sins. And what about 2 Tim 2:23-24 where it says, “*But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient*,” and Titus 3:9, “*But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless*.” “Does not debate generate strife and angry quarrelling?

First of all, the word “debate” in the KJV of Roman 1:29 and 2 Cor. 12:20 is translated “strife” in other translations. The word means “‘strife, contention,’ is the expression of ‘enmity...’” W.E. Vine says. The word does not mean “making arguments in the defense of the truth.” “Making arguments in the defense of the truth” is good, but strife, expressions of enmity are bad, and that is what is condemned in these passages. Debate, in the sense of making arguments in defense of truth” is good, but debate in the sense of an angry quarrel where there are strife, contentions and expressions of enmity is wrong. But debate does not have to include strife and angry quarrelling. Even in debate we must defend the truth in love. We must be gentle and patient in our efforts to defend the gospel in debate. The problem is not debating, but the problem is the uncontrolled anger, and the enmity that is in the hearts of those who are debating.

If it is wrong to debate, would not it be wrong to put forth arguments in opposition to debating? Those who present such arguments are debating. They are debating that it is wrong to debate. The fact is most people are willing to debate what they strongly believe. If they have strong conviction in a matter, most people will try to defend it in the face of opposition. They will debate it.

We who are Christians have strong convictions in God, Jesus Christ, and in what the Bible teaches. This is truth that will make us free from the bondage of sin and give us a home in heaven. It is a truth that matters. Let us always be ready to defend it. Let us contend earnestly for it.

Our time is gone for today. We thank you for listening.

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